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FAR ABOVE RUBIES.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF "GEORGE GEITH," "CITY AND SUBURB," "TOO MUCH ALONE,"
"THE RACE FOR WEALTH," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TINSLEY BROTHERS, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

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FAR ABOVE RUBIES.



CHAPTER I.

QUITE IN THE COUNTRY.

THE way to Berrie Down Hollow lay along a lane, winding and narrow : not a prosaic lane, bounded to right and left by low-cropped, unromantic hedges, and scanty banks covered with coarse wiry grass, where never a wild flower would dream of blooming, but a delicious lane, bordered by old elms and beech trees ; where were smooth bits of turf, pleasantly suggestive of a gallop over the sward ; a lane by the sides whereof trailed brambles and the dark-leaved ivy ; a lane where the hawthorn in the sweet May-time, when it opened its earliest buds, stretched its white arms out across the grass, striving to touch

the passer-by who idly paused to inhale its fragrance ; a lane where twined in picturesque disorder wild bryony and traveller's joy, dog-roses and honey-suckles, the woody nightshade and the greater bindweed (old man's nightcap as the children irreverently call it) ; where the eye was refreshed by looking on soft cushions of moss and ferns, graceful, and drooping, and cool ; where blossomed in their due season primroses and violets, the wild hyacinth, the blue speedwell, delicious clumps of birds-foot trefoil, the pink cranesbill, the wood strawberry and anemone, ground ivy, the "hinder-ing" knot grass, "everywhere humble and everywhere green;" St. John's Wort, that balm of the warrior wound ; tufted vetch, the creeping cinquefoil, with many another wild flower, which in the early days little hands love to gather ; which boyhood, and manhood, and middle age pass by unnoticed, but which come back fresh and bright as ever to the memory of the old man too feeble to totter away to the shady lane, to the warm sunny bank where the buds are springing, and the flowers blooming, and the lights and shadows flitting backwards and forwards, coming and going, coming and

going just as they did half a century previously, when he was young and strong, and active like the best.

We all know such a lane: it may be in one county or it may be in another; in the far-away shire where the happiest years of our lives were spent, or within a walk of the great Babylon.

To the north of London there is still a perfect tangle of narrow country lanes, in some of which Lamb assured Barton he "made most of his tragedy-comedy."

There are several not far from the churchyard where he sleeps so well. Close to his old home they wander away from Chace Side, up hill and down dale; they strike out of the Southgate Road; they wind in and out from Angel Lane to Bury Street, and thence by devious routes to Winchmore Hill and Enfield.

Some of the loveliest lanes on earth, perhaps, are those on the opposite side of the Lea, leading from Higham Hill to Chingford and Woodford.

Utterly still! utterly quiet! There the bee hums and the wild roses bloom, and there is heard no din or sound of that great city which lies so near at hand.

But Berrie Down Lane, as the road leading to Berrie Down Hollow was styled, wound on its pleasant way many and many a mile distant from London ; so completely in the country, so entirely out of the way of strangers, or even ordinary traffic, that very few persons, excepting the family resident at the Hollow, and their visitors (who, save of their own kin), were far and few between, knew anything of the beauty of that quiet walk, of that lonely approach, to a still more lonely house.

Do you mind sauntering along it with me—sauntering slowly and lingeringly ? It is in the bright summer noon-tide we follow its windings for the first time ; but you can fancy how it looks in the spring and the autumn likewise ; and the beauty of the lane grows upon you like the face of a woman who is more lovely than handsome, till you come to understand that even in mid-winter it will not look desolate ; that even when the buds of spring, and the flowers of summer, and the last leaves of autumn have departed, there will still be something left for the snows and frosts of winter to deck and crown right royally with diadems and jewels that sparkle and glitter in the cold gleams of the December sun.

There are the banks where the earliest primrose is to be found ; over which the full luxuriance of the summer greenery spreads and twines in lavish profusion of tendril, and branch, and drooping bough, and slender spray ; against which the brown leaves pile themselves when the storm king rides abroad, and the October winds begin to strip the foliage off the trees.

You can imagine now how the place looks in every season ; when the holly berries shine red and warm and glossy in the hedgerow ; when their branches, clad with polished green leaves, are torn down to welcome Christmas in hall, and church, and cottage ; when the birds begin to build ; when children part the boughs of the privet and the hawthorn in order to look for the thrush and the linnet's nest ; when the hyacinths come with the sweet mid-spring ; when the dog-roses, perishable as beautiful, open to the sun ; when the May bursts into flower, and the honeysuckle perfumes the air ; when you can pass over the brook dry-shod ; when the August sun is pouring his beams on fields where the reapers are at work ; when the leaves first change their colour, and then commence to fall ; when autumn's

blasts whistle amongst the topmost branches of the elms, and winter's hail and snow descend upon the earth. You can fancy how Berrie Down Lane must look under all these aspects; you know hereafter you could sketch the place from memory, when you come to recall its sweet tranquillity amidst the din and bustle of that great Babylon where your lot is cast.

The nearest railway-station, Palinsbridge, is eight miles distant; the nearest town, South Kemins, four; the nearest village, Fifield, more than two; so that, although, as the crow flies, Berrie Down Hollow is not actually above thirty miles from London, it might be a hundred or two in point of accessibility.

"Quite in the country, Mr. Dudley," enchanted towns-people were wont to remark; whereupon, if the speaker chanced to be a man or one of his own kin, Mr. Dudley would answer, "Confoundedly in the country;" from which speech it will rightly be inferred that the owner of Berrie Down Hollow did not appreciate the advantages of his rural residence quite so highly as strangers had a way of doing.

And it was a pity, for a more picturesque spot could

not have been found had you searched the home counties through. It was a place which took every one's fancy. The great men, who came down from London to stay with Lord Kemms when the season was over and the Row deserted, were wont to draw rein and turn a little round in their saddles as they passed The Hollow ; after which they would ride slowly on, looking back often at the dear old house planted on the side of a sloping hill.

But you shall not jump to the house in a minute after this fashion. You shall walk with me under the elm-trees ; you shall go gently down the declivity whence you catch the first view of Arthur Dudley's home ; you shall look over the fields lying on the south side of Berrie Down Lane, where the corn, his corn, is ripening for the harvest ; you shall pause and see in the distance, meadows where the haymakers, his haymakers, are at work ; you shall watch the men, and the women, and the children mowing and tossing that which in due time will be converted into money, to buy bread for him and his ; you shall descend the hill and cross the ford by means of a narrow foot-bridge, and, as you do so, you shall see his cows lying in the pasture lands chewing the cud, reflectively ; you shall ascend

more leisurely, if possible, the steeper hill beyond the brook ; and, still pursuing your way onward, become conscious of hedges less picturesque, only because kept trim and closely cropped ; of banks where the grass is smooth and even, by reason of constant cutting ; where no brambles are allowed to trail their length along the ground ; where even the honeysuckle has to submit to pruning and clipping ; where the road is free from ruts ; and now you know that to right as well as left lies Squire Dudley's land, and that you are drawing close to his house, which is to be reached through those gates not more than half-a-dozen paces distant from where we stand.

One moment, however, ere entering. Do you notice how the grey pillars on which the gates are hinged scarcely show through the branches of the two trees of *pyracantha* that have grown around them ?

Those shrubs are considered one of the great beauties of Berrie Down House. They are all white in the early spring. They are covered with green berries during the summer, which change into great masses of bright scarlet during the pleasant autumn weather, retaining their rich colour when the frost pinches the leaves of the evergreens, and the ice is

thick on the mill-pond, and the snow lying on the ground.

They have taken years and years to grow, and the Dudleys are as proud of them as they are of their quaint home, of their broad acres, of their rich pasture lands, of the Hollow (whence their place takes its name), where the blackberries still grow, as they once grew over all the fields around ; where there is quite a tangled thicket of underwood and broom and brambles, in which the children hide themselves, and tear their frocks, and pass the long summer days ; whence they emerge, when the black-berrying season comes, with faces and hands dyed purple with the rich, luscious juice.

As the great men from London are wont to admire Berrie Down Hollow, so with all the strength of their souls the younger Dudleys love its every tree, and shrub, and stick, and stone.

The domestic chronicles contain no record as to whether Arthur Dudley, owner of the Hollow, had ever similarly cherished any such attachment. Of one thing, however, the reader may be certain, which is, that in his manhood he did not entertain the slightest affection for the place.

What was the old house, with its many gables—what were the fields, the trees, the tangle of brambles, the bloom of the broom, the scent of the hawthorn, the ripple of the brook to him?

Let us pass through the gates, and approach by means of a drive, hedged almost with laurestina and laurel, Arthur Dudley's home.

The house is built of brick with curious dark stone facings, and over the doorway, carved in the same material, is the Dudley coat of arms; for before Lord Kemms, or Kemms' Park, was so much as thought of, the Dudleys were great people in the county.

Their day had gone by, however, and their fortunes, when we make their acquaintance, are like their coat of arms—a good deal the worse for wear; for which reason, although the Hollow is a pretty place, it is not a grand one. It is a sweet home, but not a great mansion; and the front, which shows towards the road, is unpretentious in the extreme.

But there is another side—that which catches the last rays of the setting sun—that which reveals itself to Lord Kemms' visitors when they have

passed the gates flanked by pyracantha, and taken the turn leading away towards Kemms' Park.

The north front of the house is nothing : it is red brick and grey stone, with two windows on each side the hall door, and five on the first floor, and three dormant windows looking out from the roof like heads thrust forth from among the slates to survey the world. It is masked a good deal from the road by evergreens and great trees of arbor-vitæ ; and the dwelling-rooms in that part of the house are dark, and somewhat dull in consequence.

To the west all is different ; there the ground sweeps down from the house to the Hollow, and the drawing-room windows look out on the rich champagne country lying beyond, which is steeped and bathed every evening in the golden beams of the setting sun. Over this west front climb roses, and clematis, and honeysuckle. Here is a westeria, which puts forth its purple blossoms long before the laburnums think of blooming. Pleasanter bed-chambers there are none in England than those on the first floor, into the windows of which the earliest roses peep blushingly.

The lawn is shaded by many a grand old tree ;

beyond the Hollow trickles a stream, which runs through Mr. Dudley's property, after supplying a mill on the road leading to South Kemms. There are sheep browsing in the fields beyond. There is a great peace in the quiet landscape; there is a stillness which strikes Londoners as almost oppressive. No hermitage could be more retired, no spot more perfect in its utterly homelike repose.

In such a place as this Time glides by, leaving few marks upon the road to show that his chariot has passed over it. Here the philosopher thinks he could meditate in peace, and eliminate truths which the world would not willingly let die. Here the clergyman deludes himself with the belief that he could compose sermons which might stir the hearts of thousands. Here, where the pace of life is slow, and the mental pulse languid, the author fancies that alone with himself and nature he could discourse eloquently about man. Here the musician imagines he might discover that roc's egg—a melody resembling no other melody; but no! here indeed might the statesman rest, and the weary physician recruit his own exhausted energies; here the great engineer might forget his thousand schemes, and the

speculator almost withdraw his mind from the price of shares and the rise and fall of debentures ;—here is Nature's temple, if you will, where men may come and hold communion with her ; here is her infirmary likewise, where she visits with sleep the heavy eyelids, and recruits with wine and oil the body which has been worsted in the world's fight ; here she lays her cool hand on burning foreheads, and compels the overtaxed mind to lie fallow ; here is the place for rest, if you will ; but it is not the place for work.

Out in the battle-field, where the city streets are full of eager soldiers ; out where the fray is fiercest, the fire strongest ; out where life is not a tranquil dream, but a mad struggle ; where men go to their long rest not rusted, but worn ; where the night's slumber is short, and the day's labour long ; out where as iron sharpeneth iron, so doth the face of a man his friend ;—there is the only place for energies to be aroused and genius developed, for profitable work to be accomplished, for life's best lessons to be learned.

Thus, at least a dozen times a day, Arthur Dudley, owner of "The Hollow," is in the habit of express-

ing himself; and yet you know, as you look in his face, that he is a man whose energy is not to be depended on, whose genius even to a stranger seems problematical; who has never practically conjugated the word "work;" who could not be an apt pupil in any of life's many schools, no matter who were his teachers, no matter what his opportunities.

A handsome man if you will, with his thick brown hair, with his soft, silky moustache, with his kindly-blue eyes, with his regular delicately-cut features, and yet many a plainer face might better, I should imagine, win and retain a woman's love.

His body, like his mind, lacks thews and sinews. He is not one of whom you dare prophecy that God, giving him health and ordinary success, he would climb high. Rather he is one of those of whom you might safely predict, that if he attempted to climb at all, he would fall back grievously worsted.

There are some people who seem to be mentally surefooted; and there are others who find every step to fortune so slippery, that giving them time enough, they are certain ultimately to get their necks broken in attempting the ascent.

But, under the shelter of his own trees, what can

Squire Dudley need with strength beyond that wherewith nature has provided him? It is for men to have their way to make that bone and muscle, an iron will, a ready wit are needful; and all the fields you have surveyed, all the broad meadows, all the rich pastures came to him, not because of the strength of his own right hand, or because of the capacity of his own brain, but simply because his father had owned Berrie Down Hollow before him, and left it to his eldest son.

“What could any human being desire more?” friend and stranger, looking over the property, were wont mentally to ask themselves; for the world knew that Squire Dudley was a dissatisfied and discontented man.

He had youth, strength, health, a happy home, a devoted wife—what more could any rational being ask of Heaven? What could the skeleton be which walked with Arthur Dudley under the elms, and across the meadows, or beside the brook? This was the question every person, who met the Squire even for the first time, put to those who knew him best. His manifest discontent inspired a certain curiosity in the mind of each individual who looked in his

handsome, effeminate face. He had a certain grace of manner and lazy elegance of movement which attracted attention to him, and caused many eyeglasses to be directed towards the good-looking stranger in various assemblies in London to which he had the entrée. He was not a bad man in any relation of life. He was a gentleman by birth, education, and taste; and yet in his own neighbourhood Squire Dudley was not popular. His skeleton was too apparent, and people rather disliked one who had not mental strength enough to shake off the depressing influence of such a companion.

“Have your closets full of bones and bodies at home, if you will,” says society; “but for Heaven’s sake do not carry them about in the sunlight on your back. Weep your tears an’ you like to do so; but get through the ceremony in private. We have, every one of us, our troubles, yet we do not proclaim them aloud from the house-tops. We demand that if, either from choice or necessity, a man fast, he shall not appear in public with a sad countenance, but that he shall ‘anoint his head and wash his face,’ and bear his trouble bravely and with good courage.”

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Virtually those were the words his neighbours addressed to Squire Dudley. Not for his skeleton did the world forsake him, but only because he had not courage to turn and grapple with it, and either lay the ghost, or shut it up in one chamber at home.

And, after all, it was such a commonplace ghost! If your curiosity be at all excited about the matter, in the next chapter you shall see its face.

CHAPTER II.

SQUIRE DUDLEY.

ARTHUR DUDLEY, ESQUIRE, of Berrie Down Hollow, in the parish of Fifield, Hertfordshire, was in the habit of informing all those whom the intelligence might, and a great number whom it might not concern, that he had, to borrow his own expression, "missed his life." And, as is usual with men who employ such a phrase, he imagined the miss had been in fortune, not in himself.

He had lost, he felt satisfied, not for want of skill in playing his game, but because the game of life was an unfair one, in which the cards were packed, and all the trumps dealt to one man, while all the low, poor, insignificant, valueless bits of pasteboard were left for another, in which from birth all the odds were against one player, while the stakes were thrust, *volens volens*, into his opponent's hand.

It is a nice, contented, comforting, reassuring creed this for any human being to hold. It makes a man utterly dissatisfied with his lot, while it leaves him only too well satisfied with himself. He is, so he thinks, as competent to take his leaps as the best in the land ; and when in succession he misses every one, he still believes it was only the fault of the steed he rode, of the groom who did not girth his horse tight enough, of the saddler who sent him in reins which broke in his fingers, of the nature of the ground, of the labourer who staked the hedge, of the proprietor who wire-fenced the field.

Other men go flying over every obstacle, and gallop past him to the goal all are striving to reach, while he labours wearily after, or lies maimed and shattered beside the first gate. Yet, mark you, this is never his fault ; it is his "cursed luck," to quote Arthur Dudley over again.

Providence, in his inmost heart the Squire considered, had a spite against him from his mother's womb, and consequently, and by reason only of this injustice on the part of Providence, he failed where others succeeded.

In the world's great workshop he was a very bad

workman, and, accordingly, he was eternally complaining of his tools. His fellows moved up in the social scale, but he never rose a step higher. With a rusty nail one picked the lock of Fortune's treasure casket; but then, as Arthur Dudley truly observed, *that* rusty nail never came into his hands. With sledge and hammer, and file and chisel, common drudges, as they seemed to him, bought their estates and took rank in the country.

His schoolfellows—mere idiots he had thought some of them then—mere idiots, indeed, he thought them still, had climbed great parts of the steep hill of worldly success, and were talked of as rising men in the pulpit, at the bar, in the hospitals, in literature, science, and art.

There was Holland, for instance, who went with him to Oxford. Well, Holland had no brains, any more than most of the people Squire Dudley knew, and yet he had somehow obtained a capital post under Government, lived at the West End, and had married a beautiful young widow with, rumour said, many thousands a year.

There was Morris, also, a man without a sixpence, without appearance, connection, manner, friends, or

father or mother to speak of, and yet he, even he ——. But it is useless to continue the catalogue.

Fate had helped every one, except Squire Dudley, on in the world, and Squire Dudley did not in the least believe that every man's Nemesis is himself.

Berrie Down Hollow, however, bore no traces of belonging to a person who held this peculiar doctrine regarding his own life. There was no disorder, no neglect. When once the gates swung back, friend and stranger alike beheld a place which was kept as well as Kemms' Park:—where no weeds grew on the walks; where the grass was like a bowling-green; where crocuses and snowdrops filled the flower-beds in the early part of the year; where there was a blaze of scarlet geraniums, and a brilliant decking of white, and red, and purple verbena, of petunias and gladioli, lobelias, and all other plants that make our beautiful English summer more beautiful still.

Never a litter of dead leaves was there about those walks; never a gate hung loose for want of hinge or screw; never a thing was left undone that willing hands could speedily put to rights; and yet there was an indescribable look of shortness of

money, both within and without the dwelling, which those who were in the secrets of the family knew was attributable to absolute pecuniary poverty; for, although Arthur Dudley owned house and lands, stock and well-filled barns, he was poor as a gentleman with such possessions could be.

And that was where the shoe pinched Squire Dudley. He had money's worth, but not money. He paid no rent; he killed his fatted calves and his prime Southdowns; he brewed his own ale; his fowls were duly trussed for his table; he ate of the produce of his own lands, and drank of the only vintages English fields will yield; he had his goodly orchard, and his fair flower-gardens; he had his horses in the stable, and his colts running loose in the paddock; he had his broad meadows, and his rich pastures; he had still a young wife, and two children; he had sinned no grievous sin; he had no secret he feared being brought to light, yet he had "missed his life." So he said, so his friends said, and the reason for this unusual unanimity of opinion chanced to be that he had no money.

"Arthur was born to be a rich man," said the elders among his kith and kin; but, if Nature had

intended any such beneficial arrangement in his behalf, she frustrated her own design by permitting him to be born in the wrong house, and amongst the wrong people, and with the wrong temperament for much good fortune to befall him.

After all, Nature does make these little mistakes occasionally, and each man and woman amongst the unsuccessful thinks he or she could have managed matters infinitely better for himself or herself, if only the disposition of affairs had been left in the hands of the person interested.

Squire Dudley thought so, at any rate. He bore a grudge against Nature for having spoiled his worldly chances, which grudge he paid with interest to Nature's representatives on earth—his fellow-creatures.

Had he been born at Kemms' Park, with the typical silver spoon in his mouth, he would, doubtless, have proved a very charming member of society. As it was, he had fallen into the habit of quarrelling with the bread and butter fate had provided for him, to such a degree that there was not a labourer on his farm, a servant in his house, a friend he possessed in the world, who would have borne with Arthur Dudley's dissatisfied temper, his discontent, and his

complainings, had it not been for the sake of his wife, who was the only person on earth who thoroughly and devotedly, and believingly and disinterestedly, loved the young Squire.

Matrimonially, luck had not been against him. If the chances of marriage be but as one eel to a bagfull of snakes, many a man, who thrust his hands into that lottery after Arthur Dudley, must have had cause to lament his evil fortune.

Matrimonially the Squire, who had otherwise "missed his life," had done well, so the world thought at least; but then this was one of the many questions of which Arthur Dudley secretly joined issue with the world.

In the experiences of his earlier manhood there had been certain love passages between himself and a handsome young heiress, whom it was the wish of his aunt, Miss Alethea Hope, that he should marry.

Then visions of a life worth living, of a position worth having, beatified the dreariness of the Squire's prosaic existence. Like all men who are utterly dissatisfied with their position, he permitted hope to tell him many a flattering tale, which had not the slightest shadow of a foundation in truth. Indeed,

in the management of his farm, Arthur Dudley was but as a reed shaken by the wind of whatever fancy whispered to him over night; and it was natural enough that, when wandering about the grounds of Copt Hall, with his first real love—worth five thousand a-year, and expectations—he should dream of a social position unenjoyed by the Dudleys for many a year; of a town house; of Berrie Down Hollow filled with grand company; of taking rank in the county; of, perhaps, tacking M.P. to the end of his name.

The future, then, seemed as full of promise to him as the old gardens at Copt Hall of roses. Can you wonder? Youth was at the helm and Pleasure at the prow, and an heiress about to become a passenger for the voyage of life; a handsome heiress too—graceful and accomplished, and much sought after, by reason not merely of her wealth, but of her beauty.

Among the roses at Copt Hall she promised to marry Squire Dudley, and yet before the roses were in bloom again she had consented to make another “happy.”

That was the first serious accident which befell

the young man's life-boat ; and he retired to Berrie Down Hollow, feeling he had been jilted, not merely by his lady-love, but by the jade Fortune.

It is true, I suppose, that, if the cause of the mental death or paralysis of any man's life be closely inquired into, a woman will prove to have been at the bottom of the apparent mystery.

Directly or indirectly, white soft hands fill the cup, either with strengthening wine, or pure water, or the drugged liquor, that steals the strength away, and impairs the finest genius.

Those from whom we expected the greatest results go to their long sleep, and leave no mark behind by which their fellows shall remember them ; and why ? because, although they had the power to achieve much, some woman prevented their doing anything.

The obstacle, which at one point or other threw them off the rails, wore petticoats, be certain. Either they did not get the right women, or they married the wrong ones. Somewhere there was a story in their lives ; ay, and it may be a tragedy too. Adam, one might have thought, considering the circumstances of his marriage, had a fair chance of happi-

ness; and yet, see what a mess Eve made of his prospects. Since which time to the present it may fairly be questioned whether any man has ever chosen the proper help-meet; whether in effect even the Adams of the nineteenth century are not originally placed in a paradise, out of which, in due time, some woman contrives to lead them. Whether or not his matrimonial disappointment really was the cause of Squire Dudley's ill success, one thing is undeniable, viz., that he, in his heart, attributed much of his subsequent bad fortune to it. Such natures are not, perhaps, capable of any great degree of passionate attachment; and, however unromantic the statement may sound, I am bound to confess it was never the woman he regretted so much as the heiress.

Arabella's raven tresses never appeared before his mental vision with one-half the same frequency as did her gold. When he failed to dig nuggets out of Berrie Down Hollow, he reflected sorrowfully on the faithless fair's five thousand a-year.

Had he married another woman with money, there can be little doubt but that then he would have thought disconsolately about Miss Laxton's

face, Miss Laxton's perfections ; as it was, want of money being the one most pressing evil in his life, Cupid folded his wings and perched on one of the elm-trees, laughing to himself, no doubt, while Mammon walked with Squire Dudley up and down the meadows and across the lea.

Passionately, perhaps, as he ever loved any woman, Arthur loved the stately fair whom he had wooed in the old-fashioned gardens at Copt Hall. She was his style of beauty ; his ideal of feminine perfection ; haughty and queenlike ; capricious and fanciful ; strong-willed and domineering ; a woman to rule slaves—to govern so feeble and purposeless a nature as his, despotically. Had all things gone well, she would, as Miss Hope declared, have “ruled the roast” at Berrie Down ; she would have been mistress and master too ; she would have led him a pleasant life of it in the old Hertfordshire home ; she would have taught him meekness and submission, and it may be contentment also, for some men are like children, better satisfied when a strong hand guides their course. As it was, the years had gone by, leaving Squire Dudley intensely dissatisfied with all mundane arrangements, parti-

cularly with those arrangements which affected himself.

And yet any other person might have made a good thing out of his life. There was the rub ! The owner of Berrie Down Hollow wanted not to make good things, but to have good things made for him ; and it was for this the world quarrelled with Arthur Dudley.

“ Hang the man,” said Compton Raidsford, who was worth half a million of money, and had worked for every sixpence of it. “ A dissatisfied idiot. Has not he got Berrie Down, the sweetest place in the county, and, confound him, has he not got the sweetest wife, too ? ”

Which statements might be perfectly true, and yet hold no comfort for the possessor of place or wife. What was the use of Berrie Down without money to keep the estate properly ; and what to such a man was the good of having a wife with whom even he could find no fault, unless, indeed, it might be, that she was a trifle too sweet—too perfect ?

After all, it is scarcely pleasant to discover, when you have thought to make a woman supremely happy, that the world will persist in thinking it is the woman who is making you happy.

This was an idea hurtful to Arthur Dudley in the extreme, and those who loved his wife best discovered in due time that the greatest kindness any friend could do her was to refrain from speaking to her husband of the blessing he possessed.

And yet Arthur Dudley was by no means either unamiable or ungenerous. He was not a bad man; he was only that which oftentimes produces infinitely worse results, a weak one; he was not cruel, nor wicked, nor wanton, nor wasteful. He had no sins, but he had many grievous faults. He was a man going to the dogs, as fast as bad management could take him, when he married his wife; and when we enter the gates of Berrie Down Hollow he is a man going to the dogs more slowly, but not less surely still.

Every one knew that his wife was the drag on the wheels of his descent. Every person was fully aware that whatever of comfort and happiness, and real respectability, his life had held, was due to her beneficent influence; and under this knowledge Squire Dudley himself chafed secretly. Had she been an ill-tempered shrew; had she been an idle, flaunting, extravagant, wasteful woman; had she

drank ; had she been a confirmed invalid ; had she been a loud-talking, boastful, hard, managing semi-man ; had she been anything, indeed, but what she was, her husband would have had a grievance and rested satisfied. As it was, he himself could not have told what his feeling was towards her. He did not love her much, and yet she loved him exceedingly. He did not consider her at all, and yet, from sunrise to sunset, her first thought was how to benefit and pleasure him.

She had set up an idol for herself, and fell down and worshipped it ; and, as is not unusual in such cases, the idol half despised her for her pains.

At the bottom of his heart, his idea about her was the same as his idea about Berrie Down Hollow.

No doubt the thing was very good ; but let a thing be ever so good, if it be not the thing you want—what then ? Why, then you are apt to look with a little disfavour and petulance upon it, even though it be perfect of its kind—a diamond without speck or flaw.

And besides, his marriage had not quite answered his expectations ; that match, indeed, had needed to

be made in a dozen heavens which would have satisfied the expectations of Squire Dudley.

A good wife, a clever manager, a home-loving woman, she was to put all crooked things straight, and to put all straight things straighter! The Dudley millennium, a reign of utter order and of utter peace, was to come to Berrie Down with the young wife. He told her all his difficulties, and she promised hopefully to help him through them. He announced to all his friends that, "once he was married," he should get on; and his friends, to a certain extent, believed him, for they knew a mistress to be sorely needed at Berrie Down House, "where everything is going to wreck and ruin," he stated to his fiancée, who, in due time, verified the truth of his assertion, and bravely put her shoulder to the wheel, to prevent such a consummation.

"I have to clothe, educate, and maintain five brothers and sisters," he declared with that frankness concerning his grievances which was a distinguishing feature of his character, and, although his future wife looked a little horror-stricken at this revelation, yet she adventured amongst those brothers and sisters

cheerfully, and, without a murmur, cast in her lot with theirs.

How much of her happiness, during the early years of her married experience, she owed to that young life, Mrs. Dudley never stopped to analyze; but there were those who knew that Berrie Down would have been a terrible home for Arthur's wife, had bright faces not grown brighter at her approach, had strong willing hands not been stretched out to smooth her way, to make her difficult path easy.

She would have found out all her husband's faults in six months, had she been thrown solely on his society during that period; as it was, she had always something else to think about—something to step between her and knowledge. She was sorry for him, and she was sorry for the “children,” as she called them. It was hard for him, and it was hard for them; and the dear hands were always laid entreatingly on some half-turned pettish shoulder, and the dear voice was ever engaged in soothing the effect of sharp and hasty words; for Heather Dudley was essentially a peace-maker, a woman whose mission it seemed to turn away wrath, to

bind up bleeding wounds, to assuage with ointment the irritation of long-standing sores.

With Heather no man quarrelled, and no woman either. She was not a good hater ; she had never sounded the depths of a great sorrow, nor of a great passion. Like many women who marry very young, even love had come to her mildly. The disease taken in youth, is never so fierce as that which attacks the patient in maturity ; as is the strength, so is the day ; as are the years, so is the joy and the agony. She was wooed and married ! smoother never ran the course of true love. On neither side was there one to interpose an obstacle, or to prevent either following the road inclination pointed out. She was a woman “without a story,” without any previous attachment—without a wrong, a grief, a remorse, a regret. Crime was to her an awful and abstract mystery, which existed only in the police-reports, and as a secret, low-whispered in some unhappy families. Of the world, she knew nothing : of its wickedness, of its temptations, of its pleasures, of its sorrows, she was innocent as her own children. She had plumbed the depth of no human joy or grief. Through the meadows the rivulet of her life had

flowed peacefully and monotonously. Vaguely she understood that there were different existences, that there were other lands, through which swept rivers, broad and deep and dark, in the depths whereof lay wrecked hopes and terrible memories; she had heard of existences lost on those great streams, of corpses which the currents carried down to the vast ocean; she vaguely comprehended that there were rapids and pools, contrary currents, cruel storms to be encountered by some human ships, but it was all vague to her—vague as the story in a book.

She had experienced trouble, but only such trouble as comes with the morning, the clouds and mists whereof vanish under the beams of the mid-day sun. Of that different sorrow which falls on humanity when the darkness of evening is closing upon man's onward course, when there is nonoon-day to follow, and only the night left in which to travel darkly, her life held no knowledge. She was like Berrie Down Hollow, sweet, natural, unaffected; and Berrie Down would have seemed strange without her, while she might, at a first introduction, scarcely have seemed so entirely in keeping with any place away from Berrie Down.

She was the sun of that house, at any rate ; - even Arthur knew things were "never the same" when she went visiting ; and, at the moment I ask you to look out on the view from the drawing-room windows of Berrie Down Hollow, you may see the Squire seated under the shade of a chestnut-tree, reading the *Times*, and inwardly chafing over his wife's absence, and wondering whether, for certain, she will return from London that evening, and bring Mrs. Ormson with her.

Mr. Dudley likes Mrs. Ormson, and he does not much like her daughter Bessie, an exceedingly pretty girl, who sits on the turf at his feet, spelling the other side of the sheet, resting her round cheek on her hand the while.

All the young Dudleys, his brothers and sisters, his own son and his own daughter, were harmless in comparison to Bessie Ormson, who had a will of her own which she asserted, and opinions of her own which she stuck to, and who was staying at Berrie Down for a couple of months, as though, Squire Dudley remarked to his wife, "the house had not enough people in it without her."

CHAPTER III.

THE FAMILY HISTORY.

IF Berrie Down "had enough people in it without Miss Ormson," Squire Dudley could scarcely in common justice lay the blame at any other door than his own, considering that of his own free will he had at a comparatively early period of his and their lives encumbered himself with the maintenance of five half-brothers and sisters, which fact it was impossible either for him or them to forget, seeing never a day passed that he did not rehearse to some one how this charge had crippled and kept him back in life.

"Other men," he declared, "found it hard enough to maintain wife and family of their own; but here was he, provided by his own father with a family large enough to drag down any man."

"It is a comfort your step-mother married, at all events, Arthur," observed Miss Ormson, "or you would have been in the workhouse long ago. The last straw, is it not so? you dear grumbling old camel."

And that was all the sympathy *he* got. Can it be wondered at, therefore, if Squire Dudley thought every man's hand was raised against him?

To explain Miss Ormson's speech, it is, however, necessary to enter into a slight history of the Dudley family, who had really owned Berrie Down for more years than any person believed, and were stated by tradition to have been great people at an indefinitely remote period, when the father of the first Lord Kemms was a goldsmith in the City, lending money to grateful princes, who, contrary to all Solomon's experience, proved themselves worthy of the trust.

From that time until the day when this story commences, the Dudleys had been Dudleys of Berrie Down; but, unhappily, while the trading Baldwins were making, the aristocratic Dudleys were spending, and thus it came to pass that each successive owner of Berrie Down left not merely that place, but also

less money, to the man who came after him than his predecessor had done.

Accordingly, in the course of many deceases and successions, the money dwindled down to nothing.

When there was not a shilling left beyond whatever amount the land might produce to keep up the family dignity, Berrie Down descended to Major Dudley, Arthur's father, who, on the strength of his landed property, half-pay, handsome face, and good address, married first, Janet, third daughter of Arthur Hope, Esquire, of Copt Hall, Essex, who was possessed of a moderate fortune, and a still more moderate show of good looks, and who brought one son, the Arthur of my story, into the world; and secondly, when Arthur had attained the age of seventeen, Laura, daughter of Maddox Cuthbert, silk merchant, Manchester warehouseman and alderman in the city of London.

Miss Cuthbert, it was supposed, would have money on her father's death; but that supposition proved so utterly incorrect, that the only dowry the second Mrs. Dudley brought her husband resolved itself into a pretty face and five children.

How many more arrows, male and female, might

have been thrust into the Dudley quiver, had Major Dudley not opportunely retired into the family vault, situate in Fifield churchyard, was a question Arthur Dudley declared only the Lord above could answer. As things fell out, however, no more sons or daughters came to the Hollow, while to Arthur descended the family estate and his mother's small fortune, which latter barely sufficed to pay the debts Major Dudley left behind him. On the other hand, Mrs. Dudley No. 2 found, when her husband died, that she had nothing to begin the world again upon excepting the dowry, afore honourably mentioned, of good looks—somewhat the worse for wear—and five children, whose ages ranged from nine years old downwards.

At this period Arthur Dudley was seven-and-twenty, and master of the position.

He could have turned his step-mother and her family adrift on the world; but, instead of doing so, he adopted his brothers and sisters and his father's widow, who, three years after 'old Squire Dudley's death, made a second very poor investment of her good looks, and married, greatly to Arthur's chagrin, a Doctor Marsden, possessed of a very small practice

in one of the London suburbs. This gentleman fancied Mrs. Dudley would make him a good managing wife, and was also under the delusion that her family—people known and respected within sound of Bow bells—might prove useful to him and advance his prospects.

Those were the days in which the young Squire was spending much time at Copt Hall, wooing his heiress. Those were the days in which he thought “The Hollow” might be converted into a great place; in which he looked at life through rose-tinted glass; in which he believed he could afford to be both proud and generous—for all of which reasons, and also because he did not choose that his father’s children should be beholden for anything to a “trumpery apothecary,” he took upon himself the burden of feeding, boarding, and educating five sturdy and rebellious juvenile Dudleys.

For this act of liberality, society generally patted him on the back, and said he was a fine fellow. Had he turned the children of his father’s second marriage out of the gates of Berrie Down Hollow, society, on the other hand, would have remembered that *he* had got the property, while the younger

children were left penniless, and rated him for his inhumanity accordingly ; but, as matters stood, everyone in the first blush of the affair forgot this fact, and pronounced Arthur to be the most generous fellow in the universe.

And so, theoretically, perhaps he was ; just one of those men who will give an old horse the run of his paddock, but refuse to pay five shillings a week for his run in the paddock of any other person.

Nevertheless, he shared with his brothers and sisters the produce of his fields, the fat of his pastures, and for two years more they roamed wild about Berrie Down—a troop of hardy young colts, unbroken, untrained, uneducated, uncared-for.

The most enthusiastic American could have desired no more complete democracy than the household at “The Hollow,” where, as is usual in all democracies, the classes governed in other communities, were rulers of the place.

At their own sweet wills, the servants went and came ; by fits and starts the labourers hedged and ditched, and ploughed and sowed. When it pleased them to do so, the younger Dudleys assembled at the presumed meal hours ; when the fancy took

them to do otherwise, they carried their luncheon and dinner away to remote parts of the farm, or feasted in kitchen and dairy on their return.

In vain, friends and even acquaintances entered remonstrances concerning the manners, habits, and appearance, of the unkempt, untaught, uncared-for, romping, impudent, mischievous young gipsies at "The Hollow." Even the two smallest of the band, a boy and girl, twins, only seven years of age, were, so the Rector of Fifield assured Arthur, going headlong to destruction. Robbing birds'-nests, pelting ducks, stealing fruit, trampling down the ripe grain, climbing trees, wading in the brook, setting terriers on cats, chasing sheep, jeering at the passers-by, these children, the good man declared, in all such occupations were not alone. Wherever they went, Satan accompanied them; and having arrived at this pleasant conclusion, it was only natural he should, even with tears in his eyes, entreat Arthur to stretch forth his hand and save the little ones from being lost, body and soul.

The opinion of the Rector, modified to a certain extent, was the opinion of the neighbourhood generally.

Since time began, such a lot of bright-eyed, fearless, active, unmanageable young "limbs" had never, so the country-people declared, been seen in Hertfordshire. They were at once the terror and admiration of all who frequented the roads and lanes round Berrie Down. Keen of tongue, swift of foot, careless of danger, the children roamed o'er common and lea and field. They were to be met with in the woods that lay westward of the Hollow, watching the squirrels, and almost emulating their agility. As for the miller, he declared his heart was always in his mouth, thinking some of them would be drowned. When the mowers were at work, at the risk of their legs the children followed close, hoping to rifle the corncrake's nest; when the wheat-stacks were moved, the five were always at hand to hiss on the terriers, to prevent either rat or mouse effecting its escape. They stayed with the threshers in the barn; they were here, there, everywhere; they chased the calves, they milked the cows, they rode the horses; they were a herd of sunburnt, freckled, bold, romping, cruel and yet tender-hearted boys and girls, who made bitter lamentation over the death of a favourite rabbit, although they

robbed nests, and carried off young birds, and tormented cats, and utterly detested vermin and all creeping reptiles ; and scandalized at the fact of five such natures "running to waste,"—so society phrased it,—people urged upon their brother the desirability of some alteration being effected in his establishment.

All in vain. Squire Dudley, the heiress' hope having vanished, cursed his luck audibly, but refused to attempt to mend it.

"Send them to school, indeed," he said to Mrs. Ormson, the second Mrs. Dudley's eldest sister—"send them to school ! I have trouble enough now to make both ends meet, without increasing my expenses."

"Why do you not marry, then?" she asked ; in reply to which inquiry Arthur Dudley only shook his head. He had been disappointed in his matrimonial schemes, and the world just then looked very black to him.

"Unless a wife brought something in her hand towards keeping herself," he observed at length, "I am afraid that remedy would prove worse than the disease."

"Nonsense!" retorted Mrs. Ormson, decidedly. "A wife would very soon set things to rights, prevent waste, see that the people you employ did their duty, and keep the children in order. You want a managing woman at the head of your establishment. If my hands were not so tied, I would remain and look after matters for you myself."

"I wish you would," sighed Arthur; and he was in earnest; for there were two people on earth in whom he believed—one, Mrs. Ormson, "a most superior woman," and the other an old housekeeper who had lived at Berrie Down Hollow in the better days, when Mrs. Dudley No. 1 was alive, who had packed up and departed when the advent of Mrs. Dudley No. 2 was announced, but who still came occasionally to see him, and lament over "Master Arthur's evil fortune in having all those owdacious boys and girls cast like mites into the family treasury."

"You are quite right, Piggott," said Mrs. Ormson, to whom, in a moment of forgetfulness, the woman once confided this opinion; "for the children are indeed a widow's mites. Your remark does credit alike to your wit and to your scriptural knowledge."

“I reads my Bible, mum,” observed Piggott, who had a secret distrust of Mrs. Ormson.

“A very proper thing for a person in your station,” returned the lady. “I always like servants who read their Bible. It teaches them honesty, and prevents their striving to be equal with their masters and mistresses. Reading the Scriptures has made you the invaluable woman you are, Piggott. I only wish poor Mr. Arthur had some one like you to manage his house for him. Do you think he could not make it worth your while to——?”

“Thank you, mum,” interrupted Mrs. Piggott, hastily; “but I would rather be excused. Master Arthur, mum, was good enough to wish me to come and take the management, after his step-mamma’s marriage; but a parcel of young children is a thing as I never was accustomed to.” And although Mrs. Piggott was too polite to add anything in disparagement of Mrs. Ormson’s nephews and nieces, still there was a look in her face which that lady rightly interpreted to mean, “More especially such a set of romping, mischievous, riotous, ill-conditioned young imps as there are in this house.”

After that, Mrs. Ormson abandoned all idea of a housekeeper for Arthur.

"Your case is a hard one, Arthur, I fear," she said, "when even Piggott will not help you out of your scrape. Clearly you must marry—let me look out a wife for you. I know so many nice girls, suitable in every respect, and several with money too. You know you ought to marry a rich woman, that is, if you can get one to marry you."

"There's the difficulty," remarked Arthur, thinking of the faithless heiress.

"Well, let me see what I can do," implored Mrs. Ormson, who devoutly believed the Almighty had sent her into the world to set right the things He had unintentionally left wrong at the creation. "When are you coming to London?"

"Next month; to stay a day or two with Dick Travers."

"Then give me a few days at the same time, and, before the summer is over, there will be a mistress at Berrie Down. Mark my words."

Whether Squire Dudley marked her words may be doubted; but he verified them, in a manner Mrs. Ormson little anticipated, by going to Dick Travers', by being persuaded to accompany that gentleman to visit his aunt Mrs. Travers, "who has three pretty

daughters, and a niece staying with her ; the finest girl I ever saw," finished Mr. Richard Travers. "No nonsense about her ; up to everything—ready for anything. Can make a dress, and dance in it afterwards ; sit up all night with the old lady, and come down to breakfast next morning fresh as a daisy. Just the girl I'd marry, if I could scrape together money enough to buy the license ; but she is too poor for me, Dudley, or for you either, for that matter. A wife with only a few hundreds is a luxury only to be indulged in by a very rich man."

"She comes of good people," he went on,—“the Bells of Layford. They have money among them, though, I am sorry to say, but little of it has fallen to her share. More's the pity ! Daughter of the late Rector of Layford—mother dead also—two sisters in heaven with father and mother—not an incumbrance of any kind. Well, it is of no use ; you cannot afford it, I suppose, any more than I can.”

“I cannot,” agreed Arthur Dudley, as gravely as though Mr. Travers had made some serious proposition to him ; and then straight away he went and did the very thing he had said in all earnestness he could not afford.

She struck his fancy—that pretty girl with the quaint name ; sweet Heather Bell, as Mr. Travers always called her.

“The name was a fancy of her godfather, an eccentric bachelor,” the lady explained. “She was the youngest of three daughters, and the other two were christened, respectively, ‘Lily’ and ‘Rose.’ ‘Call this one “Heather,” said Mr. Stewart, who loved Scotland and her purple mountains ; ‘she will grow up like the heather, perhaps—strong, hardy, a wild flower, worth a hundred of your garden rarities. Call her Heather, and I will remember her name to her advantage.’ So she was christened Heather,” went on Mrs. Travers, “and she lived and grew up as you see, while the two other daughters drooped and died. Unhappily, soon after her birth, Mr. Bell quarrelled with her godfather, who has since utterly ignored Heather’s existence. It is a pretty name for a girl ; don’t you think so, Mr. Dudley ?”

Mr. Dudley did, and thought, moreover, that Heather was considerably prettier than her name, influenced by which opinion he went again and again to London, and betook himself day after day to Mrs.

Travers' pleasant house, where he found order and competence, bright faces, and always a cordial welcome.

After the riot and confusion at the Hollow, that well-arranged house seemed to Arthur a sort of earthly heaven.

In comparison with the Travers', Mrs. Ormson's nice young ladies seemed a little affected and self-conscious; and, therefore, during the course of his frequent visits to London, he proved rather negligent of his relative.

The Misses Travers were all engaged: one to a north country baronet, another to a barrister, the third to a reverend gentleman, who was subsequently appointed bishop somewhere at the world's end. Miss Bell, however, was heart-whole, and Mrs. Travers, who laboured in common with many other people under a delusion with regard to Arthur Dudley's worldly means, never wearied of singing her niece's praises in the ears of the young Squire. What a daughter she had been—what a wife she would make—what a treasure she had proved during the whole of her (Mrs. Travers') illness!

“When the dear girls were married,” Mrs.

Travers went on to hope, "she trusted Heather would be thrown into society where she would meet with a husband worthy of her."

All of which made the man to whom she spoke eager to win the girl for himself; and accordingly, to cut a long story short, before the summer was over Mrs. Ormson's prediction was verified by Miss Bell and her poor little fortune of six hundred pounds becoming the property of Arthur Dudley, Esquire, of Berrie Down Hollow, to have and to hold for ever.

By degrees that gentleman had worked himself up into the belief that the day of his wedding would prove the turning-point in his luck. What benefits he expected fate would present him with on the occasion of his marriage, it would be difficult to say; but certainly he thought there were long arrears of forgotten gifts owing to him that might be gracefully paid by Providence on so auspicious an occasion.

For some inscrutable reason, however, Providence decided on still remaining Arthur Dudley's debtor. His lands yielded no double crops; he found it unnecessary to build larger barns for the produce of his fields; his oxen were not stronger to labour, and

his sheep did not bring forth thousands and tens of thousands on the green slopes of Berrie Down.

His life continued to be still a "miss," money grew no more plentiful, his stock failed to increase; indoors, indeed, there was comfort and regularity; but what signified indoor comfort to a man who had hoped to represent the county, and to stand on an equal footing with Lord Kemms?

No longer, certainly, were the younger Dudleys a terror to the neighbourhood, a vision of very horror to cat, and bird, and beast; but while they had to be clothed and maintained, where was there cause for gratulation? Worst of all, no one, except Mrs. Ormson, sympathized with him save Heather; and even Heather laboured under the delusion that she was bound to sympathize with other people besides her husband.

After seven years of marriage, Squire Dudley gratefully decided, in his inmost heart, that he ought to have remained single, and, leaving Berrie Down, gone forth into the world to push his fortune.

What, perhaps, established him in this opinion was the contemplation of Compton Raidsford's great house on the road to South Kemms.

From the drawing-room windows of Berrie Down Hollow he could see that bran-new mansion staring him in the face. It stood on a slight hill, beyond the mill, over the fields, across the road, and then over more fields ; but still he could see it, and, when the wind was from the west, hear the sound of the gong which announced to all whom the intelligence might interest that the Raidsfords were about to sit down to luncheon or dinner, as the case might be.

If a man like Compton Raidsford, who had risen from the ranks, could make money enough in London to build such a palace, and to keep it up when built, what might not Arthur Dudley have achieved ?

With all the veins of his heart the Squire hated the merchant who drove off to Palinsbridge in his carriage and pair, and rode out with his daughters, who sat their horses, so Arthur affirmed, with as much grace and elegance as sacks of sand.

It was well known that Mr. Raidsford had started in life as boy in the workshop of Messrs. Fairland and Wright, engineers, Stangate, at the moderate salary of five shillings per week ; and perhaps the only speech Bessie Ormson ever made, which thoroughly met with Squire Dudley's approval, was the

rather ill-natured one, that “most probably Mr. Raidsford preferred a gong to a bell, on account of early associations connected with the latter.”

“It would have been a fine thing for me, Bessie, if *I* had sprung from the gutter, with no absurd social conventionalities keeping *me* back,” he sighed ; in answer to which remark, Bessie Ormson only shrugged her shoulders and pulled a little grimace.

The man who could not achieve success at Berrie Down Hollow was not likely, in Miss Ormson’s opinion, to have ever reared Mr. Raidsford’s palace out of five shillings a week ; and, as a rule, she was in no way backward about expressing this conviction. For which reason—although she was extremely pretty, and had higher spirits and more life about her than any other guest who ever came to stay at Berrie Down—Mr. Dudley could very well have dispensed with her presence.

More especially at the juncture when you, reader, are invited to walk across the lawn, sloping away from the drawing-room windows to the Hollow—for Heather had then been absent from home for nearly a fortnight, staying with Mrs. Marsden, whose health was anything but satisfactory—and during the whole

of that time the house had been, in Arthur's opinion, at sixes and sevens, and Mr. Dudley's personal comforts somewhat neglected.

All of which formed a text from which Bessie preached a sermon—always beginning, never ending—on the difference of Berrie Down with and without a mistress.

"I never believed the woman lived who could make me agree with Solomon, till I met your wife, Arthur," she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That I am certain now of the truth of that which he never could have known from his own experience, that a woman may be to her husband, 'Far Above Rubies.'"

"Humph!" ejaculated Squire Dudley; and he went out, disgusted with Bessie, the wisest of men, and the world in general.

CHAPTER IV.

HEATHER.

LET me place the picture of Berrie Down before you once again, before proceeding with my story.

In the stillness of the summer evening, look upon Arthur Dudley's home, as the few passers-by pause occasionally to gaze, so that you may stamp the stage and its accessories on your memory ere the characters I would group together come prominently forward, and commence acting the unexciting story it is proposed to tell.

There is the house, with its many windows festooned by westeria and clematis, roses and magnolia; the house, with its red-tiled roof, with its grotesque chimneys, with its cheerful drawing-room, with its sunny bedchambers. There is the lawn, smooth shaven and green, on which the sunlight

falls in broad, golden patches, sloping down sharply to the Hollow, where the blackberry-bushes, and the broom, and the low underwood, form a mass of tangled wildness. Beyond there is the stream, and a little to the left Mr. Scrotter's modest flour-mill; then come fields, where cows are lying and sheep browsing, and away in the distance stands Mr. Raidsford's mansion, with trees about it—trees that are merged in, and seem to form a part of, the woods and plantations surrounding Kemms' Park.

The lawn at Berrie Down is studded with fine old timber. Through the air pigeons are wheeling, on the ridge-tiles they are cooing; two or three dogs are lying basking in the sun; at one of the open windows of the drawing-room a cat is seated, gravely surveying the landscape, and perhaps at the same time prospectively viewing supper, or retrospectively thinking of her latest depredations in the dairy. There is a great peace in the scene—a peace which it requires a person to have been out in the hurry and turmoil of the world fully to comprehend. There is a repose in the landscape: in the way the sunbeams fall and rest upon the grass; in the monotonous cooing of the pigeons; in the

attitudes of the cattle ; in the murmur of the stream ; in the stillness of the mill ; in the faint rustling of the leaves ; in the very perfume of the flowers ; in the soft fanning of the breeze ; in the grouping of the human figures in the landscape.

It would be a scene that for you, friend, and you, worn and weary with the noise and rush and excitement of this great Babylon—where we are all speeding so fast through life—to look upon with longing gaze, to remember afterwards with aching hearts ; but people in the country view these things otherwise, and, accordingly, it was with far different feelings to any you would experience at sight of such a sunset, that Squire Dudley occasionally lifted his eyes to look towards the glowing west, ere dropping them again on the *Times*, the news in which Miss Ormson, seated on the ground at his feet, was kind enough to share with him.

Over the grass were scattered five other Dudleys, ranging in age from fifteen years upwards ; one of whom, Alick, came up to his brother, and interrupted his study of the price of shares with—

“ I wonder what time mother will get home ; have you really no idea by which train she is coming ? ”

“Not the slightest,” said Arthur, laying down his paper, somewhat to the discomfiture of the young lady, who had been interesting herself with an “Extraordinary Elopement” paragraph; “and how often, Alick, am I to tell you not to call Heather ‘mother.’ It is not enough that I have to support you all, but you must persist in calling my wife, who is almost as young as Agnes, ‘mother.’ Mother, indeed! I detest such childishness!”

“If I had a mother like Heather, I should call her mother, and nothing else,” interposed Bessie, from her lowly position on the grass. “Don’t be silly, Arthur; let your brothers and sisters speak of your wife as they have found her.”

“But it irritates me,” persisted the Squire; “while they were young, it did not so much matter; now, however, when they are all growing up into men and women, the name sounds absurd. Heather does not look a day older than Agnes.”

“That is the beauty of the thing” returned his opponent. “If Heather looked fifty, or even as old as you do, the charm would be dispelled.”

“Thank you for the implied compliment,” he returned, reddening. It was a sore point with him

that his youth was gone, that his life had borne no fruit ; and, even had the world prospered with him, it is not a pleasant thing for a man to be told he looks old by a pretty girl !

“ Well, you know, Arthur,” said the same girl, frank as she was pretty, “ you never will look so young as your wife. In the first place, she is ten years younger than you ; and in the second, you ought to take a leaf out of her book, and learn contentment. You ought to cease grumbling and making yourself and other people wretched. You ought to think yourself lucky you have got Berrie Down Hollow, instead of always wishing you were Lord Chancellor, or Archbishop of Canterbury, or King of England, or something of that kind.”

“ What has all this got to do with my brothers and sisters calling my wife their mother ?” he asked “ They have got a mother of their own, and one mother ought to be quite enough for any person.”

“ Mine is one too many for me,” remarked Bessie, with a shrug and a pout ; evading at the same time the newspaper wherewith Arthur made believe to deal her a rebuking blow. “ It is the truth, and I tell her so a dozen times a week. As for Mrs.

Marsden, if you wanted Alick and the rest of them to feel that devotion towards her which you seem to think I ought to feel for my respected mother, why did you not let them go with her when she left Berrie Down? That was your grand mistake, Arthur; if you had given them so much a year and your blessing——”

“Bessie, I allow no one to interfere in my family concerns,” interrupted Arthur with dignity.

“Yes, you do,” persisted the young lady, “you allow mamma to do so; and as I know I shall not have a chance of speaking out my mind when once she comes, I have been trying latterly to make the best of my opportunities. Let me tell you all the benefits you would have derived from such an arrangement.”

“I wish to goodness, Bessie, you would keep your opinions to yourself; you are enough to drive a man mad.”

“And you are enough to drive a woman mad,” she returned, still looking up at him with a provoking smile on her face. “Ah, well, you have got your troubles, and I suppose I shall have mine, if I live long enough. Now, Alick, what are you waiting to say?”

“That if Arthur wants me to give up calling Heather mother, I will do so,” spoke the lad. “I know he has fed and clothed us, and——”

“Hang the boy,” interrupted Squire Dudley, pettishly, “call her what you like, only let me hear no more about it;” and Arthur and his companion resumed their study of the *Times*, while Alick, with his head bent a little, walked slowly down the lawn in the direction of the Hollow.

Suddenly there rang a glad cry after him of, “Alick, Alick, she’s come,” in answer to which the lad only waved his hand and ran on to the tangle of broom and bramble bushes, from out of which he brought a little girl, whom he bore in triumph on his shoulder up the hill.

It was a pretty scene, looking at it from the Hollow, on which the evening sunbeams fell.

The house formed the background of the picture, and for foreground there was the grassy slope, where were gathered around Mrs. Dudley and Mrs. Ormson all those who had been awaiting their coming.

A bustle and stir succeeded the previous stillness; there was a rustle of women’s dresses, a hum of women’s voices. There was much kissing and

rejoicing, much fondling over and welcoming of Heather, who, at length, disengaging herself from the detaining group of loving hands, went towards her husband, standing a little outside the circle, and said—

“They won’t let me speak a word to you, Arthur. How have you been all this time? Have you missed me very much?” And as the others had greeted her, so she now addressed him with a little tremor in her voice, with tears of gladness at being home again standing in her eyes.

From a short distance, Bessie Ormson, who had duly presented her cheek to Heather’s travelling companion, and received in return a maternal kiss, contemplated this performance, and as she did so, stamped her foot impatiently on the ground.

“Have you forgotten me, Heather?” she asked, coming forward and putting her hand almost shyly in Mrs. Dudley’s. “There comes Lally,” she added, pointing down the hill towards Alick, who advanced at a run, while the child from her triumphant position clapped her little palms exultingly, calling out—

“Faster ! faster ! mamma, mamma !”

Panting for breath, Alick Dudley put Lally into her mother's arms. "Me first, me first," she cried, clinging to Heather, and debarring with true feminine ingratitude the gallant knight, who had brought her safely up the hill, from all benefits derivable from the meeting.

"You dreadful child—you bold, exacting little child," exclaimed Bessie, taking her away by force. "Do you think no one has any right to your mamma but yourself? don't you see I leave my mamma; why can't you be as good as I am? Oh! you naughty little puss. *I* would not have red hair, Lally; *I* would not have shilling curls all over my head. *I* would sell them if I had them, and wear a wig."

Whereupon Lally in great glee declared her hair was not red, but "dolden;" and that Bessie had ugly hair.

"I have what, chatterbox?" demanded Bessie. "Say that again—only say it, and I will carry you down the hill and bury you among the blackberries. I will shake you to pieces; I will kill you with kisses. Now, is not my hair beautiful?"

"No, it is ugly," persisted Lally; and then there

ensued a fierce contradiction between the two, which ended in Bessie first making believe to smother the child, and then kissing her, as it may be questioned whether Bessie Ormson had ever kissed any other creature in her life.

"I love 'oo," said Miss Lally, as a sequence to this performance, putting two of her fingers in her mouth, and surveying society generally with the profoundest composure.

"And don't you love me, pet?" inquired Mrs. Ormson, venturing upon the hazardous experiment of testing the strength of a child's affections in the presence of strangers,—“don't you love me?”

"No, Lally don't," was the reply.

"Not if I have brought you something very nice from London?" persisted Mrs. Ormson.

Lally stretched out her little hand for the bonbons, but declined to compromise herself by expressing any attachment for the donor.

"Now, do you not love me?" asked Mrs. Ormson, persuasively.

Lally thought the matter over, and decided in the negative.

"If you do not love my mamma, you must give

her the bonbons back, Lally," suggested Bessie ; and she made a feint of taking the sweets away, which drew forth such a wail from the child as attracted public attention to the trio.

"Hush, hush, hush!" exclaimed Bessie. "I would not have believed you could have been so naughty. There, kiss mamma, and make friends with her. You are to give me half those bonbons, you know!"

To which arrangement Lally demurred ; but, eventually, being greatly under the dominion of Miss Ormson's superior will, with much trouble of mind she consented to this division ; and under the cedar-tree she and Bessie parted the spoil.

Such high matters are not, however, to be lightly settled ; and they were still engaged in deciding who was to have the odd sweetmeat, when, looking up from her lap where the treasures were laid in two heaps, Bessie saw Mrs. Dudley standing beside her.

"Come in, dear," said Heather, "the dew is beginning to fall, you will catch cold ;" and as she spoke she laid her hand gently on Bessie's shoulder.

Bessie turned and pressed her lips to the white soft fingers ; then she tossed the two heaps into one,

and saying to Lally, "You shall have them all," rose and faced Mrs. Dudley.

"I saw Gilbert yesterday," observed the latter.

"Yes?"

The monosyllable Mrs. Dudley understood to be interrogative.

"And I asked him to come down here."

"Thank you very much ; he will be glad to do so."

"I like him greatly."

"He is greatly to be liked ?" and Bessie, as she said this, slipped her hand, which was cold as ice, into Mrs. Dudley's.

"And devoted to you," went on Heather.

"I wish I were more worthy his devotion," answered Bessie.

"I wish I could understand you," was Mrs. Dudley's answer, after a pause.

"I do not think there is much to understand," said Bessie ; but her heart gave a great leap as she spoke, for she knew she was telling a truthful woman a falsehood.

"I only meant that you strike me as being a little odd at times," remarked Heather, gently.

"Not more odd than you strike me as being,"

was the reply. Then, noticing that her companion seemed surprised, she went on, "Cannot you comprehend? won't you comprehend that to a girl brought up as I have been, a woman such as you are is an enigma, a wonder, a never-ending, always-beginning puzzle?"

"What do you mean?" Heather paused in their walk back towards the house as she asked this question; and I should like you to take your first look at her as she stands thus intent and unconscious.

Hair of the mellowest, darkest auburn, out of which the original red still gleamed in the sunlight; eyes brown, and deep and tender; the fairest, softest, womanliest complexion; teeth white and regular; a full and somewhat large mouth, parted as she waited for Bessie's reply.

Altogether a firm face, and yet gentle—the face of a woman who had not known much sorrow, and yet whom you instinctively felt could endure patiently almost any amount of trouble which she might be called upon to bear; the face of a woman who had from her earliest years thought of others first, of herself last; the face of a woman whom, once married, a

man would know it was hopeless for him to love with a sinful passion, but who would be a man's good friend, his very right hand, in time of need ; a face in which there was " help ; " a face, which no person who had once seen it ever quite forgot, which you could not fancy changing and altering like the countenances of much more beautiful women.

It was the inner loveliness of her nature, its purity, its steadfastness, its pitiful tenderness which made her seem so exceeding fair. It was the gentleness and the charity, the patience and the unselfishness abiding in her, which shone in her eyes and drew people towards her.

It was a calm, good, happy face at the first glance, and yet, when any one with a right understanding of human faces came to look into it closely, there was a sadness underlying the happiness—an expression of which I should find it difficult to convey an idea, were it not that the same half-sad, half-worn look is to be observed on the countenances of those whose constitutions are being undermined by undeveloped disease, *i.e.*, by disease which unconsciously to themselves exists in their bodies, and is insidiously sapping their health.

A man says he is well, and he feels well ; and yet a doctor, looking in his face, can tell that some part of the mortal machinery is out of gear, and that ere long there will come a crash which shall reveal the secret of where the mischief has been brewing ; and in like manner, if anything be wrong about a human being's life, if utterly unknown to him or herself, there is a want in it—a vacuum ; a stream of affection running to waste ; twining tendrils involuntarily searching about for something to cling to ; if there be a mental hunger, which has not even sufficient self-knowledge to cry aloud for food ; if there be a thirsting for love, which the poor draught presented fails to satisfy ; if there exist aspirations higher and holier, loftier and grander, than can be fulfilled by the “daily round, the common task ;” if there be an undefined feeling that the best part of the nature, bestowed by the Almighty, has never been comprehended, never called out—then, when the face of that man or that woman is in repose, there will lie brooding upon it a look of sadness, which sets the mind of an observer at work, marvelling where the inner life is out of joint—what the mental disease may be—which, unsuspected even by the patient, is eating the heart out of the fruit, the wheat out of the ripe ear of grain.

And it was perhaps this second look in Heather Dudley's face—the unconscious pathos of her expression when her features were in repose, which rendered her countenance so interesting.

After all, it is not when the sunlight is streaming over the landscape that the scene appeals most to our hearts; it is the shadow lying across the hill-side, the cloud darkling on the water, the shades of evening creeping stealthily down upon the bay, which gives that mournful, melancholy pathetic look to the face of Nature, that touches us like a minor chord in music, like the sound of a plaintive melody, and awakens in our souls a powerful though often almost unconscious response.

In the twilight, when all harsh outlines are smoothed down, our dreams and our realities can walk forth hand in hand together, and there is but small discrepancy to be observed between them; and in like manner, when the shadow of sorrow rests upon the face of a friend, our hearts travel out to meet his. Before the wind comes and the rain descends, we can behold the approaching presence of the storm walking upon the waters, and involuntarily we stretch forth our hands towards the

bark which is sailing on, dreaming of no peril, unthinking of danger.

The sunshine in Heather Dudley's face was always pleasant to look upon ; and yet Bessie felt it was the inevitable shadow which attracted her, which made her cherish a love for this woman she had never felt for any other woman on earth.

Well enough Miss Ormson knew Heather's life was, according to the teaching of this world's lore, a wasted one. Well enough ; for the girl, though young, had lived in society, and had seen sufficient to teach her that, in all respects—socially, domestically, conjugally, pecuniarily — Heather might have done better ; might have married a man who could have set her up as an idol in his heart, and thanked God for every misfortune, for every apparent mischance which had led him, by strange and devious paths, to the point where he met, and wooed, and wed Heather Bell.

And Heather herself had never discovered this fact. Though there would come that terribly plaintive look over her sweet face, that anxious, sorrowful, forecasting expression into her eyes, still she was a happy woman.

All this swept vaguely through Bessie Ormson's mind, even while she replied, nervously—

"I cannot answer your question if you stand looking at me. Let us walk on, and I will try to tell you. Between us there is a gulf placed, and I stretch out my hands vainly trying to cross it. You are all candour and truth; I am all reserve and deceit——"

"Do not say that," interrupted Mrs. Dudley.

"But I will say it," she persisted, passionately. "You shall not think better of me than I deserve. You shall not imagine I am a girl like your girls—that I am a woman such as you are. Sometimes, sitting on the grass quietly by myself, I think about myself. Of course it is folly; but I do it, and wonder what I should have been like had my lot been cast at Berrie Down. I have seen nothing in my life but planning and scheming and shamming—nothing till I came here. Amongst you all, I dream of a different life to any I have ever known. I feel like a fallen angel on a short visit to Paradise. How you look at me! How stupid it is to talk about oneself! Shall we go in?"

"One moment," Heather said. She had a c.ear,

sweet voice, in which there was a great virtue of leisure. It was the voice of a woman whose life had not been hurried by anxiety, by passion, by excitement, or by over-work. It was one the melody of which never seemed out of time, never taken too fast. "One moment. Are you really unhappy, Bessie? Is there anything I could do, to——"

"To help me, you mean," broke in the other, rapidly. "No one can do that. Am I unhappy? What cause have I for unhappiness? Am I not engaged—almost settled?"

"But do you love Gilbert?" asked Mrs. Dudley.

"Love him! Yes, I do, as well as married people usually love — perhaps better," answered Bessie, and she laughed and dropped the bonbons; and then Lally and she picked them up out of the grass, and while she kept her face bent down, Bessie was thinking she could tell Mrs. Dudley one or two things which it might not have been pleasant for that lady to hear.

—"Lally and I are great friends," she said, irrelevantly. "I have put her to bed every night since you went away, and sang her to sleep afterwards. She is the only person who ever encored my

music. Don't you love 'Ritornella,' Lally? Don't you delight in 'Her dark hair hung loothe?'"

"Iss," said Lally, readily.

"Agnes adopted Leonard in your absence, and has been really quite affecting in her maternal solicitude about that young gentleman; but Lally and I agreed nobody could comb out her hair so well as I—nobody tell her one-half so many fairy tales. I fear we have not kept such good hours as we ought; but she looks none the worse for it, does she?"

And Bessie, taking up the child, turned the little freckled face towards the light, and putting her hand under Lally's chin, waited for the mother's opinion on the appearance of her first-born.

Heather, however, never spoke; there was something the matter with her she could not have put into words; there shot a pang through her heart such as had never disturbed it before, and involuntarily almost she stretched out her arms towards her little girl, who struggled into her mother's embrace in spite of Bessie's teasing efforts to detain her.

"Well, Miss Lally, you'll see whether I will shake down cherries for you to-morrow! If any

one had told me, I would not have believed you could have deserted poor Bessie. You promised to be true to me for life. You are a deceitful little monkey, and I won't love you a bit."

In answer to which Lally rejoicingly first slapped Bessie's cheeks, and then pulled her hair, and finally offered her mouth, so full of sweetmeats that she experienced a difficulty in closing it, to the end that they might kiss and be friends.

"No, I won't kiss you, indeed," said Bessie. "I won't kiss an uncertain little puss who is everybody's Joe." Whereupon Lally declared in a voice choked with sentiment and sugar-plums, "Se isn't bodies Joes."

All this time Heather kept silence, holding the child tight as she could to her heart.

The sun had set, and as their faces were turned from the west, it seemed to her that they were walking out of the light into darkness.

She never said to the child, "Don't you love me, are you not mamma's pet?" for she could not, at the moment, have borne to draw a comparison between Lally's attachment for Bessie and Lally's attachment for herself.

If Heather had a sin, it was inordinate affection for that child; if it can ever be criminal for a mother to love her first-born too much, then Heather was a grievous wrong-doer. She loved her son, but she loved Lally more; loved the absurd little girl who, though christened Lily, had grown up as unlike one as can possibly be imagined; so unlike that, not to offend the unities, it had been unanimously decided, in family conclave, that Lily should be changed to Lally.

“Lily, indeed!” sneered Mrs. Ormson; “an orange lily, perhaps.” But the red hair, that would curl in “shilling curls,” as Bessie said, was dearer to Heather than her boy’s darker locks, and she loved every inch of the child’s body—the fair freckled face, the sunburnt arms, the plump little neck, the restless feet—with a love which was terrible, as all great affection is, in its intensity.

“It was sinful,” Mrs. Ormson declared, “the way in which Heather spoiled that child!” But if this were so, there were other sinners in the house besides Mrs. Dudley, for Lally was the pet and plaything of every man, woman, and child about the place; unless, indeed, it might be her father,

who, reversing all ordinary rules, concentrated what affection he had to spare for any one on his son, whom he made, as Bessie unhesitatingly informed him, "a disagreeable little pest."

Perhaps, however, it was not the father who made the child disagreeable so much as nature. Very little of Heather's generous unselfishness seemed to have descended to her second-born. It appeared as though to Lally had fallen most of her mother's good qualities, while Leonard inherited Mr. Dudley's good looks; for Leonard was what is called a "beautiful boy," and all her best friends could say in favour of Lally was that, very probably, she would grow up into a handsome woman yet.

There was no pride about Miss Lally; she was as ready to accept affection from the odd man that cleaned the knives and boots, as from stately Mrs. Piggott, who, having made overtures to Heather, soon after that young lady's marriage, had returned to her old dominions and reigned supreme at Berrie Down, over kitchen, and dairy, and larder. To Lally, nothing in the way of attention or amusement came amiss; from the feeding of the chickens to the milking of the cows, from bull's-eyes to bonbons,

from a tour round the premises, seated in a barrow wheeled by Ned, the odd man previously mentioned, to a gallop undertaken on the shoulders of that willing steed Alick, Lally was equally agreeable to, and gratified with all. She was so utterly cosmopolitan in her ideas, that Squire Dudley's pride was daily offended by her utter want of conservatism. She was so easily pleased, and she found so many people willing to please her, that he came seriously to the conclusion there must be something wrong in the child's mental constitution—some want in her brains, as he expressed it. "I saw her absolutely one day last winter," he told Mrs. Ormson, "with about two pounds of salt in her lap, being wheeled round the walks by Ned, in search of birds; 'because you know, papa,' she said, 'if I can once put salt on their tails, we shall be able to catch them.'"

Whereupon Mrs. Ormson lifted her hands and eyes to heaven, and declared, "Heather will never stop till she has made that child a perfect idiot."

"I sent Ned to his work and Lally into the house," proceeded Arthur, "but it is of no use *my* speaking. Five minutes afterwards she was on Alick's shoulder,

and he was carrying the salt for her in a bag tied round his neck."

"Poor Heather, she will find out her mistake some day," sighed Mrs. Ormson.

"But it is not Heather alone," went on Mr. Dudley. "Everybody is the same; everybody makes a perfect idol of Lally, while Leonard mopes about alone. Where could you find a better child than he is? He will walk with me from here to the mill and never say a word, while Lally's tongue never ceases from morning till night. Sometimes I think she is in fifty places at once, for wherever I go I hear her."

"It is very sad," observed Mrs. Ormson, "the child will be perfectly ruined."

And there can be no doubt but that the lady believed she was speaking the literal truth. She did, indeed, consider Lally an utter mistake—her very existence an oversight on the part of Providence.

"A nice, quiet, pretty little girl, who would sit still in the nursery, with her doll and her picture-book," was Mrs. Ormson's idea of the correct style of thing in the scheme of creation; but a child with

red hair, with a face covered with freckles, exactly like a turkey's egg, with reddish-brown eyes, with legs that, in the course of the longest summer-day, never grew weary of carrying her from parlour to kitchen, from garden to Hollow, from Hollow to meadow; a child who had no "pretty ways," according to Mrs. Ormson's reading of juvenile attractiveness; who would not learn anything, nor keep her frocks clean; clearly the Almighty had not consulted Mrs. Ormson before He sent Lally Dudley into the world, or such a mistake never would have been committed, not even to please Heather, to whom the little girl was sun, moon, stars, and planets.

And because her heart was bound up in the child, Heather could not bear that another should come in her place, and attract Lally towards her as Bessie had done. With the "other children," as Mrs. Dudley still continued to call her husband's brothers and sisters, it did not matter; with the servants also it was of no consequence, for they were all of the one household, all after a fashion members of one family; but here was a stranger—daughter to a woman whom Heather did not much like—a girl whom in her inmost heart Heather distrusted—

making friendly overtures to Lally, which Lally accepted with even more than her ordinary readiness, with an increase of her wonted gracious affability.

Was what Bessie said true — was Lally everybody's Joe? Did she not care for her mother so very, very much, after all? For the first time in her married life there came swelling up in Heather's heart a spirit of antagonism—a desire to quarrel; but, before she reached the house, she conquered herself and said—

“Your mamma declares I spoil Lally. I wonder what she will think about you.”

“She can think what she likes, as she usually does,” answered Bessie, making a movement as if to take Lally from her mother. She had been in the habit of carrying the child off to bed every night, and it came natural to her now to do so, though Heather was at home once more.

She forgot she had been but at best a self-constituted viceroy, and that the rightful queen had returned to take possession of her own again; but the involuntary backward step with which Heather repulsed her intention was like a revelation to

Bessie. The woman she had regarded as perfect, was but flesh and blood, after all. She could feel jealous, and she did, and she meant to keep Lally all to herself for the future, and never to permit a stranger's hand to be laid, if she could help it, on the child.

But Bessie was not one to bear such a proceeding patiently. "Don't depose me," she said, in a tone which was one half of entreaty, half of banter. "It won't be for long. Am not I going to a home of my own, where I shall have something else to do than sing lullabies to other people's children? Besides, it will do you good; you are a little inclined to be jealous. Never fear, I won't take Lally's love from you; I could not do it if I would, and I would not if I could. Let me sing her to sleep still, please do. She won't need much rocking to-night;" and she held out her arms to Lally, who tumbled headlong into them, only sufficiently awake to clutch at her mother's sleeve and entreat her to "come too."

"I will come up when you are in bed, pet," said Mrs. Dudley, turning aside into the dining-room, while the girl slowly ascended the broad staircase,

humming "Isabelle" while she carried her light burden step by step up to that pleasant chamber with the snowy draperies, with the wide prospect, with its windows half-covered with roses and greenery, which came back to Bessie Ormson's memory in dreams when she was far away both from Hertfordshire and Heather.

After a little time Mrs. Dudley followed her, and kissed the children, and then stood looking at them lingeringly till she said she must go down to supper.

"Lally will be fast asleep in two minutes," remarked Bessie, "then I will follow you." But the minutes passed, and still no Bessie put in her appearance at the "old-fashioned meal," as Mrs. Ormson styled supper.

"Shall I tell Bessie?" asked Agnes Dudley; and she was about leaving the room when Heather stopped her.

"I will go, love," she said, just touching the girl's cheek with her hand in passing.

She had tender, caressing ways, this woman, whose life was still all before her. No one felt neglected when she entered. Her nature was to consider the

very dumb animals,—to leave nothing outside the circle within which she stood ; and feeling that she might have been a little inconsiderate towards Bessie, she went to seek her, meaning to make amends, to thank her for all her kindness to Lally.

Very softly she opened the door — softly as a mother does who fears to wake her children ; for a moment she looked in and hesitated ; then, even more softly than she had come, she closed the door and stole along the corridor perplexed and sorrowful.

In the twilight she had seen Bessie kneeling on the floor beside Lally's bed. She held one of the little girl's hands tight in hers, and her face was buried in the counterpane. There was no need for singing then. Lally was fast asleep : the busy feet were still, the tireless tongue silent, the curly head quiet enough on the pillow, and Bessie, whom nobody ever beheld depressed in spirits, who was always either laughing or jesting, scolding or teasing, talking or devising some mischief, was sobbing in the gathering darkness as though her very heart were breaking.

If Heather had ever thought any hard thoughts about her visitor, they were swept out of her mind then ; if she had ever felt doubts of the girl, those doubts gave place to sympathy and pity ; if she had ever felt there was something in Bessie Ormson which she did not comprehend, which she would rather not comprehend, that sensation of repulsion was changed into an earnest desire to understand her thoroughly, into a conviction that in places the stream was dark only because it ran deep.

Vaguely and instinctively all this came into Heather Dudley's heart. As she retraced her steps along the corridor, she could not have told any one the reason of the great change which had come over her ; but a great change, nevertheless, had been effected during the moment she stood looking at the kneeling figure, prostrated in a very abandonment of grief.

From that hour, through good report and through evil, when appearances were in her favour, and when appearances were all against her, unconsciously almost to herself, Heather Dudley loved Bessie Ormson.

In her grief, in her agony of sorrow, in he

clinging attachment to Lally, in her passion of despair, of hopelessness, of loneliness, of regret, of indecision, Heather's heart clave to that of her guest, and her soul was from thenceforth knit to Bessie, as was the soul of Jonathan with the soul of David.

CHAPTER V.

AT SUPPER.

ALTHOUGH Mrs. Ormson, being in her own estimation a great lady, followed the fashions and affected London hours, still, to do her justice, supper was one of those ancient customs it delighted her to see kept up in her nephew's house.

"I only wish, my dear," she said to Heather, "we could do as we liked in town, and I would have supper every night of my life instead of that late dinner, which is neither, as Mr. Ormson says, fish, flesh, nor fowl. Now, what can be more cosy and comfortable than this?" and the lady complacently surveyed the supper-table, whereon was spread a meal that might indeed have caused one of Mr. Ormson's late dinners to hide its diminished head with a sense of grievous humiliation.

Thanks to the girls, the arrangement of the table was tasteful also; there were freshly-gathered flowers peeping out from baskets filled with moss; there were cool lettuces and crisp radishes, and little banks of mustard and cress, all placed and grouped with a certain artistic effect; there was home-made bread, not brown and sodden as home-made bread usually is, but white and light as Mrs. Piggott's hands could make it; there were delicious pats of yellow butter, brought straight from the dairy; there were late cherries and strawberries, and early raspberries, gooseberries, and currants on the table; all daintily set out with green leaves; all looking, to quote Bessie, "as though somebody cared for them." There was cream so rich that Mrs. Ormson declared it made her feel inclined to forswear London for ever; while, for those who desired substantial refreshment, Mrs. Piggott had sent up her usual *pièce de resistance*—a round of spiced beef, together with fowls, a ham, and a couple of veal pies, which latter were, she knew, considered her speciality. Tarts also were there, and various "shapes;" for the good lady declared Mrs. Ormson should not go back to town and say "she never saw a meal fit for a Christian to sit down

to in the house, leastways she sha'n't say it with truth," finished Mrs. Piggott, as she arranged a paper frill like a shroud round the knuckle end of the ham, and garnished her beef with parsley.

Through the open windows the scent of many flowers came floating on the night air into the room, and the light of the lamp fell on the quiet faces of the young people gathered round the table.

"Where is Bessie?" inquired Mrs. Ormson, as Mrs. Dudley re-entered the apartment.

"She will be here presently," Heather answered, taking her seat; but many minutes passed before Bessie made her appearance, and, shrinking away from the light, drew a chair towards one of the windows, declaring she did not want any supper, that she was tired and lazy, and thought eating destructive to the romance of life.

"Don't be absurd, Bessie," said Mrs. Ormson,

"Nothing can be further from my intention," was the reply.

"How did you come from the station, Heather?" asked Laura, the youngest of the second generation of Dudleys. "I never heard the fly drive up to the door."

"We came back with Mr. Raidsford," said Heather.

"You came with whom?" demanded Arthur Dudley, from the other end of the table.

"With Mr. Raidsford. He travelled down in the same compartment, and kindly offered to drive us home; but our luggage, at least a box of Mrs. Ormson's, we left at Palinsbridge. I suppose the pony-cart can go over for it to-morrow?"

"Good heavens! mamma is going to take up her residence here," whispered Bessie to Alick, who was seated within ear-shot.

"Well, Heather, I really wonder at you," said Squire Dudley, laying down his knife and fork; "I did think you had more sense of what was due to yourself and to me than to accept a favour at the hands of such an arrant snob as Compton Raidsford, a man who looks down upon us all, who thinks more of his hundreds of thousands than of having come of an ancient family, of having good blood in one's veins."

"That's right, Arthur; that's what brings down the galleries," remarked Bessie. "Go on. In this money-loving age——"

“Oh ! of course you stand up for trade,” retorted Arthur.

“Of course, I think so I ought, when every morsel I put in my lips, every article of clothing I put on my back, is paid for by trade.”

“Bessie,” interposed Mrs. Ormson, “how often am I to tell you it is not polite to speak of personal matters in general society?”

“If this be general society, I sit rebuked,” said Bessie, while Heather pleaded—

“Without downright rudeness I could not have refused Mr. Raidsford’s offer, Arthur. I could not, indeed. He was so very kind and pressing, so cordial, in fact, that I felt it would be ungracious to decline. Would it have been possible to refuse? Mrs. Ormson, do you think it would?”

“On the contrary, I consider it would have been the height, as you say, of rudeness,” replied that lady, for once deciding against the Squire. “And, for my part, I think Mr. Raidsford a most gentlemanly person, quite above his origin. I can assure you, I never enjoyed a journey more in my life, and the drive from Palinsbridge was delightful. And to see how every one touched their hats to him,” finished

Mrs. Ormson, forgetting in her enthusiasm that such a person as Lindley Murray had ever existed.

"Touch their hats, indeed!" repeated Arthur, with a muttered oath.

"Don't be profane, sir," said Bessie, tapping him on the arm. "A Conservative ought never to object to see a great man respected by the masses. When all is said and done, it is riches make the man, you know. It is not birth, or virtue, or learning, but money, for money is power; and what is the meaning of the word aristocracy, but the powerful classes, I should like to know? Consider how many blankets, how many soup tickets, how many donations to hospitals, how much employment Mr. Compton Raidsford's income represents, and be dumb. We are all worshippers of some golden calf, so let his worshippers kneel down before him, and rest content."

"I wish to Heaven, Bessie, you were not so infernally clever," remarked the Squire.

"And I wish to gracious, Arthur, that in some respects you were not so intolerably stupid," returned the young lady, which observation elicited a statement from Mrs. Ormson, that "she should be

glad indeed when Bessie was married, and had a husband to take care of her."

"Ah! mamma, it is very well for you to talk," replied Bessie; "but you will be sorry when I am married."

"I only wish you would give me the chance of being sorry," observed Mrs. Ormson, pretending not to notice that Arthur was helping her to a second supply of spiced beef. Suddenly, however, becoming aware of the fact, she exclaimed, "My dear boy, when *do* you think I ate last? You have given me enough to dine a whole family."

"Never mind, mamma, eat it for me," said Bessie, from the open window; whereupon Mrs. Ormson bridled, and wondered "what had come to Bessie," thought "she had been made too much of," and remarked "she did not envy Gilbert Harcourt."

"Neither do I, mamma, so for once we are of the same opinion," said Bessie shortly, at which point Heather deemed it wise to turn the conversation, not sorry on the whole, perhaps, that it had glided off Mr. Raidsford, and Mr. Raidsford's carriage, and Mr. Raidsford's considerate attentions to herself.

After a time, also, other tongues began to be heard: Alick had to tell of the offer Lord Kemms had made for "Nellie," their two-year-old colt.

"I was breaking her yesterday," he said, "on that piece of ground beyond the Hollow, when his Lordship, riding past, pulled up his horse, and asked me if she was for sale. I told him I did not know, but could ask my brother; and seeing he had taken a fancy to her, I added I did not think he would part with her excepting for a long price."

"And what do you call a long price, young gentleman?" he inquired, laughing; "so I thought I might as well value her high enough. A hundred guineas, my lord," I answered.

"Make it pounds, and you shall have a cheque whenever you like to send her over," he said.

"Oh! what good fortune," exclaimed Heather, "of course you sent her, Alick;" but the lad's countenance fell. "Arthur——" he began, at which point Arthur took up his parable for himself.

"The filly will be worth three hundred next year," he said; "Lord Kemms shall not coin money out of me."

For a minute there ensued a dead silence, then

Heather, turning to Agnes, said, "And how are the chickens going on, dear?"

"Oh! we have got five sets more out since you left," was the reply; "there are fifty of the sweetest little chucks you ever saw, just pecking——"

"And two fresh calves, mother," broke in Lucy Dudley.

"And pigeons without end," added Cuthbert; "and I found in the pea-hen's nest four young ones; and, mother, the long meadow is all mowed, and we shall have the grandest crop, Ridley says, ever came off it; and we have painted the gates in honour of your coming back, and the garden is as neat as neat, not a weed; and Alick and I rolled the grass and the drive this morning, and nailed up the clematis that the wind tore down the other night, and Aggy and Alick have covered your sofa, and Lucy has——"

"Hush, Cuthbert, don't tell tales," interposed Lucy, laughing; whereupon Heather, with a smile to both, stretched her hand over towards the boy, who took it in both of his.

"May I add my mite to the family news?" interposed Bessie at this juncture. "I have trained Beauty to beg, and taught Muff to stand in a corner;

I have nearly broken my neck trying to learn to ride ; I was tumbled completely over attempting to milk Cowslip, an ill-conditioned beast, who did not in the least appreciate my delicate attentions."

"Oh, mother ! it was such fun," said Laura ; "you should have seen Bessie sprawling on the grass, and Cowslip looking at her ; Alick held her horns, and Cuthbert her tail, and Agnes showed Bessie how to milk, but it was all of no use."

"The quadruped was wiser than the biped," remarked Bessie, "and declined experiments. For the future, I intend to learn wisdom from a cow."

"I wish you could learn wisdom from anything," observed Mrs. Ormson.

"My beloved mother, that, I fear, is impossible, since I have failed to acquire it from you," said Bessie.

"You remember those letters you forwarded to me, Arthur," broke in Heather at this point ; "one was from Miss Hope, to say she had returned from Munich, and would like to come to us ; and the other from Mrs. Black, who had not heard I was in London, and wanted to know whether it would be convenient for her and Mr. Black to pay us a visit now, instead of later on in the year.

Mr. Black has been ill, and it is his most leisure time at present ; so I called in Stanley Crescent and arranged that they should bring Harry Marsden down with them next week. It really is pitiable to see poor Mrs. Marsden with all those young children about her, ill as she is."

"Was there no one else, Heather, you could have asked while you were about it?" he inquired. "We have a tolerably large barn, and plenty of hay and straw, so that a score or two more would make little difference."

Heather bit her lip, but otherwise took no notice of her husband's remark. Heaven knew she had not gone out of her way to ask any of these people, who were neither kith nor kin of hers, and whom, truth to say, it would scarcely have grieved her had she never beheld in the flesh again.

If the house were full of visitors during the summer season, as it usually was, those visitors were none of her seeking, although on her fell the burden of amusing and catering for them.

With one and another Arthur walked through the fields, or down the lane, or across the meadows, towards the Hollow. To Mrs. Ormson he would

discourse concerning his grievances ; he would quarrel with Mrs. Black about the relative merits of town and country ; while from Mr. Black he culled such information anent the “way in which a man with push and a few hundreds might get on in London,” that for months subsequently Squire Dudley thought of nothing excepting how he might best contrive to emigrate to this wonderful El Dorado, to those metropolitan gold-fields, where nuggets were discovered, not in pits and creeks, but in dingy city offices, or in great board-rooms, all shining with polished mahogany and bright morocco leather.

As for Miss Hope, she was to Heather, saving by correspondence, an utter stranger. Never in her life had the present mistress of Berrie Down Hollow set eyes on the sister of the lady who had once reigned there supreme. For more than seven years Miss Hope had wandered to and fro on the earth. She had wintered here ; she had summered there. She had been returning every season to London ; and every season she heard of some fresh plan, or met with some fresh person, that induced her to defer her intention of coming back to England.

Bohemianism is not confined to one sex or class

in the community, and there are numbers of forlorn spinsters and lonely widows, running loose about the Continent, frequenting British watering-places and foreign spas, picking up acquaintances in railway carriages and at table d'hôtes, who would be greatly disgusted if they were assured that the lives of the men they call Bohemians in London are infinitely more useful, and quite as respectable, as theirs ;—wandering women, who have no care for the Lares and Penates of the ordinary English home, whose talk is of art and of far-away cathedrals, of foreign cookery and Rhine wines, who have got up to see the sun rise in every country except their own, who go in for passports instead of Sunday-schools, who sit next “our own correspondent” at dinner-parties on their return to London, and converse with him concerning Rome and Vienna, when they mutually agree that the Continent is the place to live, that the man, woman, or child, who is content to reside in England, should be sent to the Asylum for Idiots at once.

These are the people who ask young girls whether they have been abroad, and, on receiving an answer in the negative, remark that they envy them. If

any one have the temerity to inquire why, they reply, "Because she has never seen Paris, and the first sight of Paris is something worth living for." Beyond climate and cheapness, and being able to do as one likes, these Bohemians never can give a reason for the faith that is in them; but that they hold such faith sincerely is certain.

"Everything is so different," they declare, if pressed on the subject; "the cooking, for instance."

"It is, and I detest messes," says some plain-spoken John Bull; whereupon the elderly Bohemian inquires, "whether the speaker has ever dined at Zapoli's?" implying thereby that he is utterly ignorant of the subject about which he has been talking.

Such a woman was Miss Hope—a woman who went poking about foreign galleries, and visiting artists' studios; who had, if her own account were to be believed, seen every modern statue in process of chiselling, who had been to every opera which ever was performed, who conscientiously believed she had exhausted Europe, who wrote home reams of letters about the Carnival and the Pope, about festivals and bull-fights, about Mont Blanc and German gaming-tables, and who, in common with

most English travellers, believing the Lord had made mountains and lakes, kings, queens, popes, cardinals, musicians, actors, actresses, and painters, on purpose to amuse and improve the people of Great Britain, considered it only an act of common courtesy towards the Almighty on the part of that nation to see as much of the great Continental entertainment He had provided for the pleasure and edification of his chosen race as possible.

All this and much more had Bessie Ormson heard concerning Miss Hope. Many and various were the comments that had fallen upon her ear concerning "that funny old woman," as she mentally called Arthur Dudley's respected aunt. From Mrs. Piggott, who declared she hated Miss Hope as she hated "pison," to other persons higher in the social scale—the name of one of whom, at all events, Bessie would not have cared to mention, even to herself, in her bedchamber, lest a bird of the air might carry it away—from Mrs. Piggott up, I repeat, the girl had heard stories of Miss Hope, and her heart burned within her at the sound of her name.

"I do trust I shall be at Berrie Down when your aunt arrives, Arthur," she said; and the speech was

an opportune diversion at the moment. "It has been a dream of my life to meet Miss Hope."

"I do not imagine you would agree particularly well, if you did meet," answered Arthur, sulkily.

"We might for a little time," said Bessie, laughing. "Heather, do be polite, and ask me to remain until after Miss Hope's arrival. I have heard so much of her, she seems quite like an old acquaintance."

"From whom have you heard much of her, Bessie?" inquired Mr. Ormson; "not from me, I am confident."

"My dearest mamma, other human beings besides yourself have been endowed by Providence with the gift of speech," replied Bessie; but she bent as she spoke to stroke Muff—bent in order to conceal her face, though she was sitting in the shade with the cool night air blowing right in upon her.

"Don't be pert, miss," retorted Mrs. Ormson; "from whom have you heard so much of Miss Hope?"

"From one and another," answered Bessie, carelessly; "I am the rolling stone which gathers moss, contrary to the words of the proverb; and, wherever I go, I hear something to the advantage or disad-

vantage of somebody. Concerning Miss Hope, the moss I have gathered is to the effect that she dresses peculiarly badly abroad, and peculiarly well in England; that foreigners regard her with awe and wonder, as an average specimen of the British female; that she praises everything English in foreign countries, and everything English when abroad; that she is to be met with on the stairs leading to attic studios, and dines in the most wonderful manner for threepence per diem; that she is considered mad by the Parisians, and a great and good lady by the Germans; that she was requested to leave Vienna; and that at Rome she is regarded with distrust, because of the audible comments she is in the habit of making during mass, concerning the mummary of the Catholic religion. For the rest, I am told that, since her nephew has come of age and married, she has vowed a vow never to set foot in Copt Hall, but will, when she returns to England, take up her abode in a London boarding-house, where she can discourse to her fellow-sufferers concerning French cookery and George Sand, the gondolas of Venice, and the terrible designs and wonderful genius of Napolcon the 'Third.'

“Who told you all this, Bessie?” demanded Squire Dudley, turning round in his chair as he asked the question.

“What can it matter who told me?” she replied.
“Is the record not true?”

“True or false, I should like to know the name of your informant,” he said; “for I never knew but one person who talked in that way of my aunt. Was it a man or a woman?” he persisted.

“You might be more polite, Arthur,” she replied; “a lady.”

“Was it Mrs. Aymescourt?” he asked.

“I did not know there was such a person upon earth,” she replied.

“Don’t tell stories, Bessie,” interposed Mrs. Ormson; “you must have heard of her over and over again.”

“If I ever did, I have forgotten all about her,” answered Bessie; “at any rate, it was not from any one of the name of Aymescourt I ever heard a sentence concerning Miss Hope’s peculiarities.”

“And who is Mrs. Aymescourt?” inquired Heather.

“Oh! a friend of Miss Hope’s; at least, she used

to be," answered Mrs. Ormson, vaguely ; and then she looked at Arthur, who, pulling cherries out of a basket lined with green leaves, refused either to meet her glance, or to vouchsafe any further information on the subject.

"Did you know Mrs. Aymescourt, Arthur?" asked Heather, whose curiosity was a little piqued.

"I—yes, to be sure ; she used to be staying with my aunt at Copt Hall, but I have not seen her these ten years."

"Was not there something about Mr. Aymescourt having come into another fine property?" inquired Mrs. Ormson.

"Marsden said he had," returned the Squire ; "likely enough, for we know who takes care of his own ; and certainly Aymescourt had luck beyond what falls to the share of any honest man. He had a large income to begin with, or else madam never would have married him ; but I dare say they were quite able to spend it all, so probably this other property fell in none too soon."

"Where do they live?" asked Heather.

"I have not the slightest idea," Arthur answered ; "my aunt keeps up some kind of acquaintanceship,

I understand, with them, as she does with everybody, but I have seen nothing of them for years ;” and as he spoke Squire Dudley made another dive among the cherries, and pulled a fresh handful from amidst the green leaves.

“Give me some, Arthur, before you eat them all,” entreated Bessie ; “or, stay, the moon must be up by this time ; I can go into the garden and gather some for myself. Will you come with me, Alick ?”

And Bessie, who was not above flirting, even with a lad of eighteen, when it suited her purpose to do so, drew Alick from the dining-room across the hall, into the drawing-room, and so out on to the long terrace-like walk which overlooked the Hollow, and all the pleasant country stretching away towards the west.

“I did not want the cherries in the least,” she began, putting her hand within Alick’s arm, and speaking in her usual don’t-careish tone ; “I did not want the cherries, but I wanted to get away from mamma—she does so worry me, that I say things to her I feel sorry for afterwards. What a pity it is we cannot choose our own mothers, or that we are not allowed to exchange them after we come to years

of discretion! Only to think, that out of three sisters my mamma should be my mamma. Even Mrs. Black, or your own mother, I think I could have got on with; but, as papa wisely observes, these things are arranged for us."

"But don't you love your mother, Bessie?" asked the boy, with a vague sense on him that the girl's talk was wicked.

"Don't I what?" she demanded.

"Don't you love your mother?" he repeated, with the feeling growing stronger upon him, that his view of the matter was correct, and Bessie's wrong; "of course, I know you disagree with her, and quarrel, and contradict her, but still, for all that, don't you love her in the bottom of your heart?"

"Shall I tell you a secret?" she inquired, as they turned the end of the house—the garden end.

"If you will be so kind," Alick replied, thinking at the same time how exceedingly beautiful Bessie looked in the moonlight. Perhaps she guessed at his thought, for she sighed, wishing that some person whom she liked much better than Alick Dudley were standing beside her at the moment, and then she forgot what she had been going to say, and went a

long mental journey, while the youth waited patiently for her to speak.

“Will you be so kind?” he asked at last.

“So kind as what?” she repeated. “Oh! to tell you a secret. From the bottom of my heart, Alick, I never loved but one woman on earth, and that woman is your brother’s wife. If I had a mother like her now, or a sister, or anything—” she went on, hurriedly, only to stop short and leave her sentence unfinished.

“Heather would be a mother to you,” said the lad, softly.

“No, she wouldn’t,” was the reply; “she couldn’t, and it is not fit she should. There is nobody like Heather could be mother, or sister, or friend, or anything to me now. Heather does not like me, I know she does not, and I cannot blame her for it, for I am cross and hateful.”

“Oh, Bessie! you are delightful, and so pretty!”

“I wish I were not pretty, flatterer,” she said. “I should like to be as ugly as Joan Harcourt, and as good. It must be nice to honour one’s parents, let them be as disagreeable as they will, and to love one’s neighbour, even though she keep a parrot,

and lets her girls hammer at a piano placed against the party-wall, and is altogether as great a nuisance as Mrs. Riccarde, who lives next door to us. Oh, Alick, how lovely and peaceful the country looks in the moonlight! Is not that the house at Kemms Park I see, shining white among the trees? What a delicious place! Do you know Lord Kemms' family name?"

"Baldwin," he replied.

"Baldwin!" repeated Miss Bessie, and there was just a shade of disappointment in her voice. "Is he a good-looking man, Alick? I wish I had been with you yesterday in the Croft when he passed. That is the only taste which I have inherited from my mother; I do dearly love a lord."

"Bessie!" exclaimed Alick.

"It is a fact," she persisted; "I do not in the least believe they are made of the same flesh and blood as the commonalty. I delight in men who have had ancestors; that is one reason why I like all of you, because on one side of the house, at least, you come of good people."

"I am not ashamed of my mother's family," answered the lad, a little hastily.

"No, but you are not proud of it; Maddox

Cuthbert, alderman, no doubt, was a most charming old institution, and highly respected in the City; but still, that is not like being in the peerage, is it, Alick, or amongst the country gentry?"

"I do not think it matters much what one is, if one have no money," he replied. "Did you not yourself say at supper, riches make the man?"

"If there is one thing I object to more than another," interrupted Bessie, "it is to have my own conversational sins brought up as witnesses against me. I was only jesting about lords, Alick. Don't I know the ancestors of Lord Kemms were something or other in the city, not nearly so respectable as our grandfather? But, seriously, I should like to see his lordship. I have a curiosity about him; was he alone, or had he a groom?"

"He was quite alone," said Alick Dudley, laughing, almost in spite of himself, at her persistency, "and he spoke to me very much as anybody else might have done. Do you not think it would be a good thing if there were a kind of 'Court Circular' published at Kemms Park, telling us all about the great folks there—what visitors they had, what time they ate and drank?"

"Yes, and we might be the editors, and walk over every day to learn particulars of their doings. I wish Lord Kemms would ask me to go and stay there."

"Perhaps he may, when Mr. Harcourt has made his fortune, and is created an earl."

"Then I shall be grey-haired," she said, "and have rheumatism so bad, that even Kemms Park will seem disagreeable. How beautiful those trees do look, Alick! Is there not a village somewhere near Mr. Raidsford's place?"

"North Kemms you mean, I suppose," replied her companion; "it is two miles, I should say, beyond Mr. Raidsford's, that is, two miles by the road, but there is a path across the fields, which cuts off a great corner. It is a pretty walk to North Kemms, and there is such an old, old church there."

"Where?" asked Heather, joining them at the moment.

"At North Kemms," answered Bessie, promptly. "Alick is going to take me to see it next Sunday afternoon, are you not, Alick?"

"If you do not think the walk too much," he said; and then the rest of the party came out to

"see the moonlight," and there was no more talk, either about Lord Kemms or Kemms Park.

That same night, Bessie having shaken down her hair, Heather came into her room, hoping Bessie would not be vexed if she asked her one little favour.

"A hundred, if you like," answered the girl.

"I should be glad if you would speak to your mamma with more, more——"

"Politeness," suggested Bessie, finding Mrs. Dudley pause for want of a suitable word.

"Not exactly politeness, but respect," said Heather; "you know, dear, she *is* your mother, and you ought to——"

"Please, stop," entreated Bessie. "I will strive to do what you ask for *your* sake; if I cannot be good for that, nothing can make me good. You were very fond of your mother, I suppose—very tender towards her—very dutiful, no doubt?"

"I hope I was," Heather answered, in that low tone in which women talk of the dead whom they have loved.

"And she was very fond of you?"

"My dear child, what a question! of course she was."

“Well, supposing she had not been fond of you, nor you of her, perhaps even you might not have found it in the least degree easier to be dutiful and tender than I do?”

“But you must be fond of her,” Heather asserted.

“I do not see any *must* in the matter; I never asked her to bring me into the world. If she had consulted me, I should decidedly have preferred being left out of it. Well, then, since to please herself she did bring me into the world, what has she done for me? My brothers have had all her care and attention; she married young, as you know, and to some women it does not seem a very agreeable thing to have a great girl treading on their heels, and calling them mother. She dressed me as a child long after I was a girl;—when she could not help herself, and had to acknowledge that I was growing up, she sent me from the nursery to school, and kept me there till the state of the domestic finances compelled my return; since which time, the one object, aim, and end of her life has been to drive me to marry somebody—to get rid of a child she never liked.”

“Bessie!” remonstrated Heather.

“It is true,” the girl persisted, passionately; “she never liked me—she never wanted to have a daughter—she has told me so over and over again. Suppose you acted towards Lally as she has acted towards me. Suppose you kept the child shut up in a London nursery, and never spoke to her, unless it was to find fault with or punish her. Suppose you were out from morning till night, following your own pleasure (my father was rich in those days, and she could visit, and dress, and spend as much as she chose), and left Lally to the mercy of strangers, to the kindness and attention of a cheap nurse. Suppose you grudged your child the money necessary to give her a good education, and sent her to a school where there was not enough to eat, nor sufficient clothing to keep her warm at night. Suppose Arthur gave you money to pay for an expensive school, and that you pocketed the difference——”

“Ah! stop—stop, Bessie! I won’t believe it—I cannot believe any woman, any mother, capable of such wickedness!” entreated Heather; but Bessie relentlessly continued:

“Then when Lally grew to woman’s estate, should

you expect her to honour a mother who had acted such a part by her? and what I have told you is not the worst, Heather, is not the worst!”

“And what is worst—dear?”

“That I must keep to myself,” replied the girl, rising as she spoke, and flinging her hair back from her face. “I have often thought, since I came down here this time, that such people as we are have neither right nor title to mix among such as you; and yet I do not know—whatever of good I have learned, whatever faith in virtue and honesty I possess, I have learned and I have acquired from you. Oh, Heather!—oh, Heather!——” and she clasped her hands high above her head. Then, in a moment, the fit was over, and the speaker fell into her usual tone. “I will try to do what you ask,” she said, “and treat my respected parent with the deference you desire. Kiss me for that—kiss me once, kiss me twice—kiss me as though you meant it. If I had been a man, I should have married you, Heather; if I had been a duke, I should have laid my rank and wealth at your feet, and prayed you take them—take everything, if you would only take me as well. If you tell me to do it this

minute, I will stay with you all my life, and never marry any one."

"What a strange girl you are!" said Heather, tossing over the soft hair, twining and curling it round her hand.

"Ay! all puzzles seem strange till you hold the key," answered Bessie. "Let me light you along the passage, and do not lie awake thinking of me."

CHAPTER VI.

BESSIE'S LETTER.

THE summer days ran on. They flowed by smooth and pleasant—so Bessie Ormson said in one of her sentimental moods—like a swift river among lovely green fields.

“Look at that stream,” she remarked to Alick, as they stood, on the Sunday following Heather’s return, side by side, leaning over the parapet of a little bridge which spanned the Kemm; “do you know what it puts me in mind of?”

“No,” answered the boy, to whom sometimes the talk of his companion was as the talk of a creature from another world; “I cannot know what anything puts you in mind of, for you are like no other person I ever met in all my life before.”

“So much the better for you,” she replied. “Do I not often inform you I am one of the daughters of Cain, come on a short visit to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden? and that brings me back to the river : it runs by—like existence at Berrie Down—with scarcely a ripple on its surface. I should like to be the Kemm,” she added in a lower tone, “murmuring on over the pebbles, never singing a more passionate strain than that—never fretting or fuming—never forcing my way through rocks and stones—never brawling—never uncertain as to my future course—but stealing quietly and peacefully to the gréat sea ;” and as she spoke, Bessie dropped her arms over the parapet of the little bridge, and looked into the stream sadly and dreamily.

Let me sketch her for you—Herbert Ormson’s only daughter, Gilbert Harcourt’s affianced wife—or rather let me make the attempt, for it is not easy to give in pen and ink an idea of the personal appearance of a girl like Bessie Ormson, whose mood was shifting as the sunbeams, whose beauty was changeful as the shadows flitting over the grass in the golden summer-time :

Scarcely of the middle height, figure slight and

delicately rounded, she was not destitute of dignity, though lithe and lissom as a child: she had a small head, which she could rear, on occasions, almost defiantly; a mass of dark brown hair, smoothly braided on her cheeks, and then rolled up at the back of her neck in coil after coil; eyes of the darkest, deepest, divinest blue, shaded by long black lashes, that gave to her face, when in repose, an almost pathetic expression; a complexion which neither sun nor wind seemed able to spoil; she had lips like coral, and teeth like pearls; and a short, provoking, piquant, saucy upper lip. Was it any wonder, think you, that Alick Dudley should consider her the perfection of beauty?—that almost unconsciously the fancies and loves of his future life were shaped and moulded by this his earliest ideal of feminine loveliness?

And yet it was no mere beauty of feature that caused Bessie Ormson to seem so irresistibly charming: it was that ever-varying expression of which I have spoken—that shifting look, now sad, now gay, now earnest, now provoking, now coquettish, now soft and womanly, and again almost sarcastic in its keen perception of human folly

and human weakness—which gave variety to her face.

Always changing—never for two minutes the same—always filling the beholder with a vague wonder as to what strangely-varied mental book such a face could be the index.

It was wistful, it was saucy, it was sorrowful, it was joyous. There was a shadow lying across her eyes one moment; they were sparkling with mirth the next. She would look at Heather as though she were gazing into the depths of a clear stream, with a strange dreamy glance, and before you could fix that expression on your mind it was gone.

See her with Lally, and her face was the face of a child; leave her to herself for an instant, and there came an anxious, troubled look on her countenance. She was all things—mischievous, tender, high-spirited, quiet, loving, cross, full of bitter repartee, of premature worldly knowledge.

She had eaten of the tree too soon; and, if that fruit set her mental teeth on edge, who may say the fault lay with Bessie?

She was clever, as Arthur Dudley had truly

observed ; that is, she was not clever in accomplishments, nor as regarded solid learning, but rather socially and conversationally.

She was no linguist, not much of a musician, nothing of an artist ; she had not read much, but she could guess what people were thinking of ; she could piece this and that together, and tell what motives influenced them, what were their purposes, by what considerations they were swayed. For this reason, many persons had an objection to very intimate association with the girl ; she never rested content with words—she went straight back to the thoughts words concealed.

The young folks at Berrie Down Hollow, however, who had no secrets and no plans, found her capital company. Even Lally was not more tireless than she. Ever ready to go out to walk, to inspect the poultry-yard, to try her hand at butter-making, to gather flowers and group them into bouquets, to shake the cherry-trees, to carry Lally into the Hollow and hide her among the blackberry bushes, to smother the child in armfuls of freshly-mown grass, to lead the way, fleet of foot, to the meadows, where the hay-makers were at work, to don with demurest air a

snowy apron, and help Mrs. Piggott whisk eggs, or prepare her fruit for preserving!

Even Mrs. Piggott, who entertained a most cordial dislike for Bessie's maternal parent, brightened up when she saw that pretty roguish face peeping in at the door of kitchen, larder, and dairy.

Of severe, not to say despotic, principles, inclined to resent intrusions into her domains as acts of revolt against a legally-constituted authority, Mrs. Piggott, nevertheless, not merely tolerated Bessie's visits, but rejoiced in them, and few things delighted the beauty more than a forenoon with "that delightfully respectable old wonder," as she called the house-keeper.

It was a sight to see Mrs. Piggott and Bessie employed in making red-currant jelly—Mrs. Piggott arrayed in a clean cotton gown, and a cap with many borders, looking sharply after her assistant to see that she religiously removed every stem, while Lally, perched on the table, superintended the work, and ate whole handfuls of the fruit, in gleeful defiance of Bessie's threats of executing condign punishment upon her.

"Dear, dear Miss," observed Mrs. Piggott on one

occasion, surveying Bessie over her spectacles, "who would ever think you were your mamma's daughter?"

"No one, Mrs. Piggott," was the young lady's prompt reply. "Don't you think it a pity mothers so seldom take after their children?" which inversion of the usual proposition so utterly astonished Mrs. Piggott's understanding, that she was glad to direct Bessie's attention to "that blessed child who has eaten a quart of picked fruit, Miss, if she has eaten a currant;" whereupon Bessie placed Lally on the dresser, where, in the midst of plates and dishes, the little girl sat as if on a throne, exchanging saucy speeches with Miss Ormson, till it pleased that young lady to lift her down from her perch and take her away to the hay-field, or out into the croft, to see Alick breaking-in Nellie.

It was wonderful to observe the way in which Bessie and the child agreed; more wonderful still, perhaps, to notice the manner in which the former wound all the household round her finger.

It was Bessie this, and Bessie that. She re-trimmed the girls' bonnets; she taught them the latest mode of dressing hair; she could change old

garments into new by some dexterous sleight-of-hand. Ribbons and laces, deemed useless before her arrival, and cast aside, as tossed and torn, reappeared after her advent in forms that delighted the hearts of Arthur Dudley's sisters.

She was "good for everything," the boys declared. Pretty and coquettish herself, she liked to see other girls pretty and coquettish too; and during her visit the Misses Dudley went about with wild flowers in their hair, with dainty bouquets in their belts, with dresses guiltless of a crease, "making much of themselves," as Bessie phrased it.

How she revelled in that house! How she, so constantly a prisoner among bricks and mortar, loved the freedom and the liberty of that country life! How she stood drinking in the pure, unde-filed air, that came floating over the fields and the hedgerows to her! Much as the young Dudleys loved their home, they had not that appreciation of every flower and leaf, of every effect of light and shade, which astonished them in their guest.

Her love of the country was keen and sharp, like the relish of a half-starved man for food.

Here, at last, was a life to be desired—a life idly

busy, sinlessly sensuous ;—here was a lotus land of indolent industry, bright with sunshine, where the air was full of all delicious perfumes—where the days were happy and the nights calm—where the morning dawned upon a peaceful household—where the moon looked down, not upon a turbulent sea of human woes, sorrows, sins, passions, disappointments, but on the pleasant fields where the grass was springing, and the sheep lay dotted about on the soft green slopes.

The birds in the hedges, the ferns in the dells, the soft cushions of moss, which she would caress with her little hand and touch with her lips, as though such delicious greenery must be conscious of her caresses; the branches waving in the breeze, the whirling of the pigeons in the air, the hundred sounds of the country,—all these things had charms for Bessie which made the Dudleys find her a most appreciative and delightful companion.

Never was there such a girl for a walk, Alick Dudley thought, as Bessie Ormson. If she went out in the early morning, before the sun had risen high enough to have much power, Bessie would stop to look at the cobwebs glittering with dew-drops, at

the drooping blades of wet grass, at the tears on the leaves of the dog-roses. Were it later in the day, she revelled in the luxurious warmth; in the far-away tiled roofs peeping red from amongst sheltering trees; in the quiet cattle; in the hush of the noon-tide; and when the afternoon stole on, and the evening shadows began to fall, she delighted in the solemn darkness of the distant woods, in the flow of beck and stream, in the figures of the labourers hieing them home across the field-paths, in the children grouped about the cottage doors.

“It is peace,” she was wont to say—“perfect peace. I wonder if heaven will be like this!”

There are poets who cannot write a line of verse; there are artists who yet lack the power to reproduce that which fills their souls with pleasure almost amounting to pain. The understanding mind and the skilful hand are not necessarily sent into the world together. The power of appreciating things lovely and beautiful is often divorced from the capacity to create or portray the lovely and the beautiful, or, rather, is not always mated with such capacity; and, although Bessie Ormson possessed no creative or imitative genius, she was yet endowed with

that diviner genius—the ability to luxuriate in the thousand works of the great Creator.

And it was this faculty of perception and appreciativeness which, added to her quickness and vivacity, made Bessie such good company that no one in the length of a summer's day could weary of her. Nothing escaped her—not a flower growing by the wayside, not a cloud fleeting across the sky, not a change of expression on a man's face, not an unusual cadence in a familiar voice.

With all her sarcasm and frivolity, the girl's human sympathy was intense; and, perhaps, when the secret of most popularity is exhausted, it will be found only to exist in the fact that the man or the woman popular can enter into and understand the moods and feelings of other men and women.

It was so with Bessie, at all events. She loved Berrie Down Hollow with a love almost amounting to passion. To her, that place was the realization of peace, happiness, home, beauty, contentment; and yet she could comprehend the natural desire of the lad who stood beside her to leave Hertfordshire and go forth to push his way in the world.

It was of that desire they had been talking as

they sauntered across the fields towards North Kemms.

The hush of the first day in the week was around them and above ; but still their discourse had been of the world, its prizes, its blanks, its successes, its disappointments, and the boy's cheek flushed as he spoke of how he should like to win a name and a position for himself in the great city, where the greatest part of Bessie Ormson's life had been spent.

"Of course I shall be sorry to go away from the old place," he went on, "to leave it and Heather ; but I should feel proud to make a fortune, and bring it back to her. I should not stay away from Berrie Down for ever."

"Yes, you would," Bessie answered. Then, seeing him look surprised, she went on : "You, that is, the Alick Dudley who is talking to me now, would go away, and never return. I know it is well for you to go ; but still, do not think you could ever return. You will leave here a boy with a face as smooth as my own, and you will come back a man, never to hear the song of the birds with quite the same ears—never to look out over the fields and

the woods with quite the same eyes—never to listen to the trees and the winds whispering quite the same words. You will go out”—from the height of her twenty-three years she looked down and told him this—“and you may come back, but the noise of the world will mingle with the old familiar sounds, and never let those sounds fall in perfect harmony on your soul more.”

And it was then they came to the Kemm, where Bessie paused to look into the stream.

“I wonder, Bessie, where you have learned all you know,” said Alick, after a pause.

“Not out of books,” she replied, laughing; “the truth is I know very little, except that I am very happy at Berrie Down, and shall be very sorry to leave it.”

“Do you not expect to be happy when you leave Berrie Down?” he asked.

“That is not a question to be rashly answered,” she said. “I may be—I may not be. Don’t you remember that game Lally plays at—blowing dandelion-down away to tell the hour? Whatever number she has arrived at, when the last feather floats off, is the time. My future depends on much

such a chance ; but whether it turn out happy or unhappy, be certain I shall not sit down and bemoan myself."

"But surely you hope to be happy in your marriage?" the lad suggested, hesitatingly, and yet with a degree of restrained eagerness which made Bessie smile.

"I hope to be so, Alick," she answered, however, gravely; "but hopes are poor houses to live in. Fact is," she added, in a gayer tone, "I know as little about my future life as you know about yours. When we are old man and old woman, we will sit down by the fireside together, and compare notes; we will tell one another about the roads we have travelled, and the countries they led to."

And Bessie lifted her eyes as she spoke, and looked away to the woods surrounding Mr. Raidsford's house, which mingled with those of Kemms Park.

In the after-days, the pair stood in the same spot again on just such another afternoon, and thought of that talk on their way to Kemms church.

"We shall be very late," Bessie said at length; and then they turned and pursued their way in the

delicious stillness across the fields to North Kemms. It had been a freak of Bessie's, this Sunday ramble alone with Alick to a far-away church; but then Bessie was given to freaks, and no one paid any particular attention to them.

Mrs. Ormson declared such a walk in the heat of the day "was absurd;" even Heather looked surprised when she and Alick announced their intention of starting directly after dinner. Lally had implored "me too," for once vainly, and an offer of companionship from the remainder of the Dudleys had met with no better success.

"I want to go alone with you, Alick," she declared. "I want to talk to you quietly;" and of course Alick was delighted.

Like most girls, Bessie conceived all the wisdom of Solomon had come down to her. In the ways of this world the young lady believed she was a thorough adept; but she had not that reticence in talking about the ways of the world and the wickedness of the people in it, which is, perhaps, the first sign of thorough knowledge.

The wise man is modest. The man who thinks himself wise lacks sense to hold his tongue; the

saint is eloquent about sin; the sinner is not given to speak of the flavour of that strange meat whereof he has partaken; for all of which reasons Bessie, who was but a very novice in that lore wherein she aspired to instruct others, was assiduous in her endeavours to teach Alick that the world where he had been placed was a mistake, the hope of happiness in it a delusion and a snare.

This young woman, who delighted in every country sight and sound, who loved Lally and adored Heather Dudley, who luxuriated in pleasant sights and in all sweet sounds, who had her life all before her, who could take fun out of most things, and was not above confessing to a weakness for strawberries and cream, would nevertheless talk on a fine summer afternoon as I have taken the liberty of transcribing her conversation.

She thought she was original, perhaps, in her remarks; she thought also possibly—and this thought chanced to be perfectly true—that Alick Dudley delighted in her observations; and yet her talk was but as the talk of other girls of her own age and temperament throughout the length and breadth of England.

It was the nought is everything and everything is nought creed of our own girls at the present hour; of those who, whether they take refuge from their own luxuriously sad thoughts in earnestness or frivolity, in balls or soup-kitchens, in fashionable follies or house-to-house visitings, are yet agreed on one point, viz., their conviction that the round world and all that therein is cannot be considered otherwise than hollow and unsatisfactory.

They believe fully, not only that it is all a fleeting show, but that it was "for man's illusion given," and they smile compassionately on the poor souls who are deluded with such a transparent mockery, and go about raving in a fine melancholy about the sins and sorrows, the snares and the pitfalls, of our very imperfect earth.

Did the girls who read Evelina and Cecilia share this doctrine, or were they, less sceptical, gulled, sweet simpletons, into believing the Almighty intended them for happiness instead of misery?

It would have been a clever person who could have persuaded Bessie Ormson into such a faith, at all events; and as, for most young people, talk of the kind to which I have referred—melancholy, dreamy,

romantic, unsatisfying talk—has a singular charm, she might, with her conversation, have done Alick Dudley a considerable amount of mischief, had it not been for a little circumstance that occurred on the very same Sunday afternoon of which I am speaking, and set the lad thinking about a much more possible calamity than had been contained in any of Bessie's imaginative sentences.

On, over the fields they walked; they left the Kemm and Mr. Raidsford's property far behind; they strolled leisurely through the pleasant Hertfordshire meadows, and stood here and there to watch the sheep scuttling away from them, or to notice the placid contentment of the cattle lying on the smooth grass whence the hay had just been carried.

On, past cottage and homestead; on, to where more woods met their sight; on, through the little hamlet of North Kemms, and then by a short lane to the church surrounded by a graveyard, where the mounds were many, and the headstones few.

The service was half over by the time they stood within the porch, but the sexton experienced no difficulty in providing the new comers with seats.

There were more empty than full in that church, so he ushered the pair into a great family pew near the pulpit, and shut the door carefully after them.

Only to open it, however, again next instant, and give admittance to a tall handsome man, who might have belonged to the same party, so quickly did he follow on their heels.

A very handsome man—when the stranger took his face out of his hat, where he held it for the orthodox period ; Alick Dudley was quite satisfied on this point, and glanced curiously round to ascertain whether Bessie chanced to be of the same opinion ; but Bessie's eyes were fastened on her prayer-book, and so Alick turned again to the new comer to discover what effect Bessie had produced on him.

Apparently, none whatever ; he looked at the girl carelessly, looked her over from head to foot ; then examined Alick in the same supercilious and critical style, after which he surveyed the congregation at large, the clergyman, and the clerk. Then, having apparently exhausted North Kemms as Bessie had exhausted the world, he caressed his moustache, and retired into his own contemplations.

All of which proceedings piqued, not to say

angered, Alick Dudley; and this anger was the more unreasonable, because, if the stranger had seemed struck by Bessie's beauty, the lad would have been out of temper still.

But that any one should remain indifferent to Miss Ormson's perfections appeared to Alick little less than a miracle. Even the rector, an old, white-haired man, was to be detected stealing furtive looks at the demure young lady who had come so late to church; and what right had this "great swell," so Alick mentally styled the stranger, to give himself airs, and never bestow a second glance on a girl who was undeniably beautiful?

"He may meet hundreds of fine ladies before he sees anything like her," decided Master Alick; but the offending gentleman evidently did not share in this opinion. Wherever his thoughts might be, clearly they were not wandering in the direction of Bessie Ormson, who, on her side, never lifted her eyes to look at him, but kept them fixed resolutely on her little prayer-book, the rector, or the east window; a piece of propriety which, considering the girl's proclivities for lords and grandees of all kinds, was somewhat astonishing.

But then, if Bessie were a trifle coquettish, she was not bold ; a maiden less likely to take the initiative in a love affair could not have been found in the length and breadth of Hertfordshire.

Which fact made it, perhaps, all the more extraordinary that the stranger took no heed of so strange a mixture of modesty and vivacity and beauty.

A handsome man, and yet not altogether of prepossessing appearance. Sitting opposite to, and staring at him with all his eyes, Alick felt he did not much like him. What had he come to church for ? He sat there absorbed in his own thoughts, whatever they might be, hearing the sermon possibly, but unheeding it certainly. Vaguely, as in a dreamy kind of way, Alick conjectured the world, of which Bessie had been talking as they crossed the fields, might have some share in their companion's reverie.

The lad was gifted with sufficient sense to understand that a man like this was much more likely to know all the ins and outs of a wicked world than Miss Bessie Ormson ; and, while the rector droned through his sermon, an impression, undefined and intangible, it is true, came into Alick's mind, that, all through her wise conversation with him, Bessie

had been arguing out some mental question with herself; forecasting what the years might bring to her, wondering with what ears she should listen to the sweet home sounds again, with what eyes she should look over the green Hertfordshire fields in the future which was uncertainly stretching forth before them both.

The thoughts of youth are generally as unformed as the features of childhood; and thus, though Alick was conscious of some curious enigma perplexing him, he yet would have been surprised had any one placed the puzzle he was considering before his mental vision, perfect in form and clothed with words.

At length it was all over—the sermon, the service, the reverie—and, with a sense of relief, the lad opened the pew door, and stood in the aisle while his companion passed out. In order to allow her to take precedence of him, the stranger had stepped a little back into the pew, and this slight courtesy Bessie acknowledged by the merest inclination of her pretty head. Then Alick saw the gentleman look at her, for an instant only—next moment his dark eyes were roaming over the church, scanning the monuments, glancing up at the organ-loft.

When they were half way down the aisle, Alick turned to see what the stranger was doing, and found him, not following Bessie with his eyes, but still scrutinising the church as though he were a member of the Archæological Society. There he stood in the pew just as they had left him, indolently surveying roof and walls, tombs and windows. As they passed through the porch, Alick looked back once more, but the object of his curiosity had not moved.

“Waiting for the rector, perhaps,” thought the lad; and he hurried after Bessie, who by this time was half way across the graveyard.

“What a dear old church!” she said, as they reached the gate. “I like it much better than Fifield.”

“Excuse me, but I believe this is your prayer-book,” said a voice close beside her at this juncture, and the interruption was so sudden that both Alick and his companion started to find the stranger close beside them.

“Thank you, I am sorry to have given you so much trouble; yes, it is mine,” Bessie stammered, her face covered with blushes as she received the book, which she put in her pocket; while the stranger raised

his hat and turned back across the churchyard in the direction of the Rectory.

“Now, was not that stupid of me?” asked Bessie. In his heart, perhaps Alick thought it was, but he did not express this opinion, he only offered to carry the book for her.

“No, thank you, it is so small, I always keep it in my pocket,” she answered. “If there be one thing more than another I dislike, it is to see people parading church-services and Bibles about on a Sunday as though they want to let all the world know they have been praying;” and thus Bessie rattled on while they retraced their way across the fields, and over the Kemm, and past the woods, and so to Berrie Down, which place they reached about the time when Mrs. Ormson, awaking from her afternoon siesta like a giant refreshed, proposed that society generally should take a turn on the lawn.

To this proposal society, nothing loth, agreed; and thus it chanced that Bessie and Alick were descried entering the croft and rounding the Hollow, and ascending the hill leading to the house.

Once amongst the family group, it was needful to pause and give full particulars of their walk, of North

Kemms church, of the congregation, of the music, of the sermon, and of various other matters which the younger Dudleys were pleased to regard in the light of news.

By a singular coincidence, however, neither Alick nor Bessie made any mention of the strange gentleman who had turned aside towards the Rectory. The young lady, indeed, talked so much and so fast that it would have been difficult for her companion to have edged in much information on the subject, even had he felt inclined to do so.

But he did not feel inclined; he could do little except watch Bessie, and wonder what had come to put her in such astonishing spirits, and to make her so much gayer than when they started—so utterly absorbed in giving a full and detailed account of the appearance of the rector, the prosiness of his sermon, the beauty of the walk, and the horrible discord of the choir, that she had not a moment's attention to spare for Lally, who revenged herself by coolly thrusting her little hand into the depths of Bessie's pocket, in search of those sweetmeats which her friend usually kept there for the child's special delectation and benefit.

“Not a sing,” exclaimed Lally at length, prayer-book in hand, and sorrow written on every feature in her face.

Then Bessie, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, turned and snatched the book from Lally, with a look of such blank terror, that for a second it seemed to Alick Dudley almost as though the sun had gone behind a cloud.

“Nossing for me,” remarked Lally reproachfully, and in a tone of mild expostulation against a state of society in which such things as pockets destitute of sweetmeats could be—“nossing for me?”

“You naughty child,” began Miss Ormson, sharply; but next moment she relented, and, catching Lally up in her arms, told her she would see whether “Bessie had anything in her drawers for her bold little girl.”

After which, exit Bessie with Lally, the latter contemplating the family group, as she departed, over Bessie’s shoulder, and staying her appetite by thrusting three of her fingers as far down her throat as was compatible with personal safety.

Once in her own room, Bessie, after finding the sweetmeats, turned them and Lally out of the apart-

ment, locked her door, and then eagerly opened her prayer-book.

Had Heather Dudley been on the threshold, she might well have marvelled what calamity had happened to the girl. She shook the book, she fluttered over the leaves; she turned her pocket inside out, she lifted her handkerchief, she inspected the carpet, she examined the prayer-book again, then she walked to the door, unlocked and opened it, to meet Alick Dudley on the threshold.

"Is this yours?" he asked, giving her a sealed note. "It dropped from the prayer-book when Lally pulled it out of your pocket. I picked it up, but I did not like to give it to you on the lawn."

"You dear, good boy," she said; but Alick never smiled at this praise. His face was as pale as Bessie's was red, his tone as quiet as hers was hurried.

For a moment the pair looked at each other, then she said:

"Alick, may I trust that you will not tell Heather?"

"I will tell nothing," he answered. She put her hand into his, but he never clasped the little

soft fingers. Involuntarily almost she put her lips to his and kissed him, but still the lad made no sign.

Then she broke out passionately, "Don't judge me hardly, Alick; don't judge me till you know all."

"I do not judge you, Bessie," he replied, "but I am very sorry;" and there came a mist before his eyes, through which he could not see her distinctly, and he turned and walked away along the corridor, feeling he had that day got his first real lesson in deceit and hypocrisy.

He had believed in Bessie; he had listened to her talk; with delight and wonder she had seemed to him walking in the golden sunlight like something too good for the every-day, common, work-a-day world, and, behold! she was but a hypocrite playing in Heather's house a double game.

Yes, he knew now the world she had come from must be a wicked place, when such things as this were possible in it. He had been deceived, and straight away he thought of Delilah and Sampson, putting up his hand to his mouth the while to feel if those were really the lips Bessie had kissed.

In her fear and humiliation she had offered him this bribe ; when he thought of that, his anger melted away into a great flood of shame and pity, and then the lad whom this girl, his senior by nearly five years, was teaching so rapidly to be a man, turned into his own room, where, covering his face with his hands, he cried like a child.

After all, he was very young and very inexperienced, and he found it hard to see the dream-castle he had built on so frail a foundation as a woman's truth and purity levelled to the ground.

There comes a time when such knowledge, as had been vouchsafed to Alick Dudley that day, provokes smiles rather than tears.

When a man has arrived at the conclusion that all women are weak, that all women are frail, it is rather gratifying to his penetration than otherwise when beauty confirms this view of the question ; but Alick Dudley had not commenced travelling along the road which leads to this pleasant opinion, and it was very grievous to him to find his idol had feet of clay, that she had been making a cat's-paw of him, that the stranger and she knew more of each other than was well for either, that she had fallen in

a moment so low as not to be above bribing him with a kiss.

And at that point the lad grew dizzy and confused. There was a great mystery being developed in his heart at the moment. He could not have put that mystery into words; but I may for him. The ideal he had idolized lay at his feet, broken and shattered, marred, ruined, and defaced; but the reality which occupied its place—a weak, deceitful, unhappy girl—he loved.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE VISITORS.

AND still the summer days ran on. They rippled by, scarcely murmuring as they passed ; and life at Berrie Down flowed smoothly along, leaving no mark or trace behind.

The flowers faded, and fresh flowers bloomed ; the cherries were all shaken down ; the haymaking was over ; the blackberries in the Hollow were forming so rapidly that Lally's little fingers had to be forbidden plucking the unripe fruit ; the noon-tides were hot and sultry ; every blossom was gone from the chestnuts ; the shade in Berrie Down Lane was sweet and pleasant, and both pedestrians and equestrians loved to linger there under the trees, on the soft grass by the roadside. There was the purple haze on the distant woods, and in the nearer

valleys ; the leaves had lost their fresh greenness, and looked in want of rain ; the Kemm was reduced to a mere thread of a stream ; and the rivulet which meandered through the fields beyond the Hollow was utterly dried up.

Arthur Dudley was beginning to complain loudly of the drought. He spoke of impending loss of cattle ; of the probability of the after-grass being all scorched up ; of failure in the turnips ; but no one paid much attention to his forebodings excepting Heather and Mrs. Ormson.

There was this difference, however, between the two women, that, while the latter condoled with him, the former endeavoured to make him believe matters would not turn out so badly as he feared.

Comforters are not generally so much liked as sympathizers, and it was therefore with Mrs. Ormson Arthur walked around the fields, bemoaning his usual ill-luck as they paced along.

“It was like my fortune to have so many cattle in such a season,” he grumbled. “Any other year it would not have mattered ; but this”—and so the Squire wandered on, while Mrs. Ormson said it was “dreadful,” and gently hinted that the arrange-

ment of the weather, like the arrangement of many other things, was not so perfect as it might be.

“Now, what do we want with rain in London?” she inquired; “and yet you know it is always pouring there. How much better it would be if you could have the rain instead! I dare say, if the truth were known, it is coming down there in torrents at this very moment.”

But in this supposition Mrs. Ormson chanced to be wrong, as successive visitors from London arrived in due time to testify.

“How delightful to get into the country out of those suffocating streets!” remarked Mrs. Black, a woman of the utterly feeble, limp, languid, and mildly pretty school. “Oh, Arthur, how I *envy* you this sweet spot!”

In answer to which speech Arthur declared that, if she knew all, perhaps she would find less cause for envy than she imagined. Whereupon Mr. Black, a stout, middle-aged, light-haired, florid, good-looking, self-satisfied individual, observed:

“Yes, that is what I always say, Dudley—my very words, almost. Nobody knows where the shoe pinches but the man who has to walk through life in

it. And, after all, though the country is very nice, and Berrie Down a refreshing change from the city in such melting weather, still we all know it is not London. No," repeated Mr. Black, striking the sod with the heel of his boot, and looking over the landscape as though daring the fields and the trees to contradict him, "it is not London."

"And a very good thing too it is not," added Bessie; in answer to which addendum Mr. Black stated his belief that she was just the same as ever, and inquired how, if she disliked town so much, she expected to be able to spend her life in it.

"As I have done hitherto," she replied, "under protest."

"Persuade Gilbert when he comes down to turn farmer," suggested Mrs. Black, sentimentally. "I only wish my lot had been cast among these peaceful scenes."

The only comment this remark elicited being a muttered sentence from Mr. Black, in which Bessie thought she heard something about "peaceful devils," the conversation might have been considered ended, but for a voluntary statement from Master Marsden, a young gentleman in knicker-

bockers, to the effect that he hated London, but that the country was jolly. He had been down in Surrey in the spring, he went on to inform the assembled company in a shrill alto, where he robbed fifty—oh ! a hundred—birds' nests, and wasn't it prime !

"Then you were wicked boy," said Miss Lally, with that charming promptitude of judgment which is a peculiarity of her sex.

"Why? don't you rob nests?" asked the new arrival, in answer to which question Lally shook her comical little head gravely.

"Well, you must be a muff; but then, to be sure, you are a girl," said Master Marsden, in a tone which was at once contemptuous and explanatory.

"She is not a great ill-mannered boy like you, Harry, at any rate," observed Bessie, whose fault certainly was not reticence in expressing her sentiments.

"I don't want you to talk to me, I don't," said the boy, turning upon her in a manner which spoke of former passages of arms between them.

"Well, it is not every one who gets more than he wants," she replied ; at which juncture Mr. Black called the young lady to order, declaring the way she

talked to the boy too bad—"just like breaking a thingumderry upon a whatever's its name."

"If you mean a butterfly upon a wheel, I beg to remark that Harry is as unlike a butterfly as anything I can imagine," answered Miss Bessie.

"We don't expect little boys to be butterflies," said that general peace-maker, Mrs. Black.

"No, it is great girls who are that," struck in Mr. Black; and he laughed at his own wit so long and loudly, that Lally stood looking at him in astonishment.

"Well, little one, and what are you staring at?" inquired Mr. Black, at length noticing that Lally had opened not merely her eyes but also her mouth as wide as possible.

"Oo," was the immediate reply.

"Oh! indeed; and what do you think of me now you have stared?" he asked.

"I think 'oo like Doe Cole," replied Lally, nothing abashed at public attention being directed to her.

"And who may Joe Cole be?" persisted Mr. Black; but no one seemed disposed to afford him the information he desired.

"Who is this Joe Cole that I resemble?" repeated Mr. Black, looking round the circle, and especially at Bessie, who had her face buried in her pocket-handkerchief.

Round the circle, too, looked Lally. "He's a fool," she explained, evidently desirous of enlightening Mr. Black's ignorance. Alick had raised a warning finger too late; out came the sentence in the middle of a dead silence; and then Bessie burst into a perfect scream of laughter; while Arthur, in angry tones, exclaimed, "Take that child away, somebody. She's not fit to be among civilised people."

"Ought to be whipped, and sent to bed," volunteered Mrs. Ormson.

"Poor little thing traced some fancied resemblance," urged Mrs. Black, as an extenuating circumstance.

"She is completely ruined," said her father; and as the child passed him, led off the field by Bessie, he struck her, for the first time in his life, a smart blow, which caused Lally to break forth into a perfect paroxysm of grief.

In one moment Bessie had her in her arms, and

faced round on the Squire. "I never had a greater mind to do anything than box your ears, Arthur," she remarked. "I shall say you are like Joe Cole next;" and with that Miss Ormson swept away from the group, followed by some of the younger Dudleys, who were unanimously of opinion the matter was to be kept from Heather.

"I am so sorry, Bessie—oh! I am so sorry," said Agnes Dudley.

"And so am I that all these people are here," Bessie answered. "They will spoil Arthur among them, not that, goodness knows, there is much to spoil about him."

"It is always the same whenever Mr. Black comes," continued Agnes. "I can remember how we used to dread the very sight of him or your mother entering the gates. I suppose I ought not to say it, Bessie, as she is your mother; but she always made things worse for us here, at least we thought she did."

"Don't let the fact of her being my mother prevent your expressing your opinions," said Bessie, who, seated on the floor in the nursery, was engaged in striving to comfort Lally. Most sincerely

she hoped and believed Heather was, at that moment, closeted with Mrs. Piggott; but Heather happened to be in an adjoining room, and, hearing the sound of Lally's exceeding bitter grief, came in to see what could be the cause of it.

"Why, what is the matter with my pet?" she asked.

Agnes looked at Bessie, who promptly answered, "Lally has been very naughty."

"No, Lally not been naughty," broke in the child, stretching out her arms towards her mother. "Lally only said that fat man was like Doe Cole—and pa hit her—pa did;" and Lally buried her head in her mother's breast, and wept abundantly.

"Arthur did not mean to hurt her," Agnes explained.

"And Lally was very naughty, for she said Joe Cole was a fool," added Bessie; but, unheeding both the girls' statements, Heather passed from the room, carrying Lally with her, and appeared no more until supper-time, when Bessie noticed that she had been crying.

"I wish you would keep that child of yours out of the way of strangers till she has learnt how to behave

herself," Arthur remarked from the foot of the table, with his customary tact and consideration.

"She shall not annoy any one again," said Heather, who had intended to take a private opportunity of apologising to Mr. Black for Lally's seeming rudeness.

"Oh! she did not annoy me, ma'am," returned that gentleman. "Considered it rather a compliment than otherwise, I assure you. You know the saying, I dare say, that it takes a wise man to act the fool; and I rather think any one who tried to get the better of me would find he had no fool to deal with, Mrs. Dudley."

"When I was at school, uncle, we had a copy text to the effect that 'Self-praise was no recommendation,'" remarked Bessie; at which speech some of the younger Dudleys tittered audibly—a proceeding that caused Arthur to declare he did not know what the house was coming to.

"It is a very charming house," interposed Mrs. Black, who really, Heather felt, was a perfect blessing to society. "I do not know a house like it anywhere. Every one amongst my friends has heard of Berrie Down Hollow. I always say it

seems to me the very abode of peace,—the true cottage of contentment.”

“I would very gladly exchange it for your house in town,” answered Arthur.

“Or for the same acreage in town,” added Mr. Black. “By Jove, if a man had only one of your fields anywhere about Threadneedle Street or Cornhill, he might snap his fingers at the world.”

“Yes; because in that case he would be so rich he could afford to live anywhere,” ventured Heather, to whom such remarks were by no means new; “but, as the land is not in London, why need we think about impossibilities? It is a choice with us between a small income in town and a small income in the country; and you know, Mr. Black, how much farther a small income goes in the country than in town.”

“Now that is just the point on which you are so much deceived,” replied Mr. Black. “There is no place on earth where a small income can be made go so far as in London. Do you want meat? You can have what you want, cut as you like, sent home on the instant. Now here, I suppose, your butcher lives five miles off; everything is at least five

miles off in the country. For rich and poor alike, London is the place. What is there a man can't get there?"

"Green fields," answered Mrs. Black.

"Green fields! nonsense," returned her husband. "Have not you the parks? What can a human being desire better than St. James's Park, or Regent's Park, or even Victoria? Is not there grass enough in them to content you? Is Hampstead Heath not big enough for you to walk over? Have not you the squares? Have not you trees? Even in the City there is not a street but you may see a tree in it. Do you want amusement? there is not a night but you may go to a dozen places of amusement, if you like. Do you want society? you can have as much as you please. Do you want books? they lie ready to your hand. Everything is next door in London. We have not to send a dozen miles for a lemon there, ma'am, as Mr. Whatever-you-may-call-him, that parson fellow, said he had to do. From grapes at thirty shillings a pound to a farthing's worth of tea-dust, you can be accommodated in London. There is no place like it on earth, Mrs. Dudley, take my word."

Poor Mrs. Dudley sighed, and answered "that, for her part, she liked the pure country air."

"There never was a more mistaken idea than that," said Mr. Black. "Country air is not pure. How should it be, with its decomposing vegetation, with its damp fields, with its ditches filled with grass and dead leaves, with its arable land covered with natural and artificial manures, with its imperfect drainage, with its impure water? Read the Registrar-General's returns, and you will soon change your opinion about the healthfulness of the country."

"That is what I often say," remarked Mrs. Ormson.

"But still there are some most unpleasant smells in London," observed Mrs. Black, feebly.

"In Bermondsey, for instance," added Bessie.

"All healthy," persisted Mr. Black. "Now, in the country, people breathe poison without knowing what they are swallowing. What is called pure air is very like sparkling water; it seems so because it is full of the seeds of disease, because it is literally laden with decomposition and ——"

"The eight o'clock express stops at Palinsbridge, uncle," suggested Bessie at this point. "You

might catch it if you were to sit up all night, and start away from here, say, at five o'clock in the morning. I should not stay another day in the country, if I were you."

"Well put in, Bessie; but I won't take your advice for all that," said Mr. Black, good-humouredly. "I have come down here meaning to enjoy myself, and to make a complete holiday of it."

"I should have thought you might have compassed both ends, by spending a day at the British Museum," remarked Miss Ormson.

"How sharp you have got, Bessie, my dear," ventured Mrs. Black. "Is it anything in the air, I wonder?"

"If it be, it is to be hoped you will take it," observed her husband. At which speech Mr. Black laughed and Mrs. Ormson laughed, while Heather looked at her guests, blankly wondering how she was to preserve peace amongst them.

"Gilbert will soon be down to keep Bessie in order," remarked Mrs. Ormson.

"I am glad to hear it—he is a very nice young fellow," affirmed Mr. Black.

"I have never seen him," said Arthur Dudley.

“Then you will be pleased when you do see him,” answered the oracle; “a very intelligent, modest, well-mannered, pushing young man as any I know.”

“And handsome too,” added Mrs. Black, glad to find some smooth water where she could safely launch her little conversational boat again without fear of breakers. “And handsome too; and oh! so good to his mother and sisters.”

“I liked him greatly,” said Heather, from her end of the table; and, as she spoke, almost involuntarily she glanced at Bessie, who, with her head turned aside, was looking out into the semi-darkness of the summer’s night.

Alick had his eyes fixed on Bessie also. Perhaps he was trying to reconcile the fact of Gilbert Harcourt with the existence of the stranger they had met in North Kemms church. Anyhow, he felt curious, and, though Heather knew nothing about the North Kemms stranger, she had grown curious also.

In due time Mr. Harcourt arrived, as did also Miss Hope, and then, indeed, the house was full—so full that Bessie privately likened it to a Noah’s Ark, and wondered how the patriarch managed to keep his animals in order.

"It is more than poor Heather can do," sighed Alick.

"What makes her have them?" asked Bessie.

"Do you think Arthur would be satisfied if she had not?" inquired the lad. "It is just the same every year, only, unhappily, this year they have all elected to come together."

"I am one of the 'all' Alick, remember," she said, laughing.

There had been a time when Alick would indignantly have denied this assertion; but he remembered North Kemms church, and held his peace.

"You are angry with me," she went on, noticing his hesitation. "Perhaps, if you knew everything, you would be sorry." And, with that, Bessie turned and walked into the house, leaving Alick, who certainly did not know everything, in a state of wonderment.

Why should he be sorry for Bessie? For himself he might feel sorry that two men stood between him and the prize he had vaguely begun to covet; but where was the need of pitying her? If she did not like Gilbert, why had she accepted him? If she did like him, why had she gone to North Kemms to meet another lover?

But was he a lover? Alick had read a sufficient number of old romances obtained from Miss Carfort, who kept a very small circulating library in South Kemms, to be well aware that the walk across the fields, the evidently pre-arranged meeting, the note secreted between the leaves of Bessie's prayer-book, did not of themselves justify him in the conclusion that Miss Ormson was carrying on a clandestine love affair. The man might have some hold on her. He might have known her before her engagement to Gilbert; he might have some power over her father; he might be in possession of some secret of the family: so the lad argued; but still the conviction remained strong within him that Bessie was playing a double game; though how she contrived to do so puzzled him beyond measure.

No more walks across the fields; no lonely excursions to Fifield post-office; no solitary rambles, even within the limits of the farm.

It might not perhaps be generous on his part to do so, but he watched the young lady as a cat might watch a mouse, and the more he watched the more mystified he grew.

If she were carrying on a secret correspondence

with any one, it was impossible she could treat Gilbert Harcourt as she did. From morning till night the pair were together "like a pair of dear turtle-doves," as Mrs. Black sentimentally declared. Never a cross word did Bessie bestow on her betrothed; never a saucy speech did she address to him. Let who else would, feel the sharpness of her tongue—and it was sharp at times, as a serpent's tooth, according to Mrs. Ormson; and a wasp's sting, to quote Mr. Black—Mr. Harcourt always escaped scot-free.

Not even to Heather was Bessie so uniformly agreeable as to Mr. Harcourt; and another strange thing Alick noticed came to pass about the same time—Bessie ceased in her conversation to be either sententious or melancholy.

In Mr. Harcourt's presence she never spoke about desiring to ripple by, like the Kemm; she never talked concerning the world's barrenness; about the dreariness of human life.

The lover had come, and Mariana no longer cried, "I am a-weary." The lover had come, and she discoursed before him much after the fashion of other people. If the later fashion seemed to Alick less

attractive than that formerly adopted by her, who can say the fashion was not a better one—more fitted for every-day wear ?

But Alick was young, and liked sentiment. As our mothers, when girls, used to luxuriate in Mrs. Hemans' poetry, so Alick had revelled in Bessie's talk, concerning the world and life, and the arid dreariness of both.

To Mr. Harcourt, however, who hoped for some small share of happiness in existence, whose career had not been a smooth one, who loved rather to hear of the bright sunshine than of winter's clouds, Bessie's poetical reveries would have been utterly distasteful; and as the young lady anxiously laid herself out to please him in other matters, so she anxiously selected her talk to suit his tastes. No one on earth could have proved a more submissive mistress than Bessie Ormson; to those who were learned in the ways of women she might have seemed a trifle too submissive for everything in the engagement to be right.

As for Heather, she delighted in seeing matters progress so smoothly. With a half-jealous feeling gnawing at her heart, she watched, during her rare

moments of leisure, Gilbert's devotion to the lady of his choice. What a lover he appeared in Heather's eyes! with what an ever-increasing pain she saw him follow Bessie about; fearful lest the very winds of heaven should touch her too roughly. How tender he was; how thoughtful; how mindful of her lightest wish; how his face brightened when she entered the room; with what looks of pride and affection he followed her about!

It was all a wonderful revelation to the woman who had never experienced such devotion; who was becoming conscious that in the book of her own existence some of the sweetest pages of most lives had never been penned; who had never known, till she beheld love showered upon another, that such love had never been proffered to her. It was so wonderful a revelation, in fact, that she could not help remarking one day to Miss Hope:—

“How very fond Mr. Harcourt must be of Bessie!”

“Yes,” answered that lady, who was surveying the pair through her eye-glass,—“he seems to like her well enough; more than she is worth, in my opinion. He is fonder of her than she is of him. She is only marrying him for a home, my dear.”

“For a home!” repeated Heather, in amazement.

“Yes—or to get away from home, if you prefer that way of putting it. The match will not turn out well. Remember, I said so;” and Miss Hope took another look at the engaged couple, while Heather’s thoughts flew back to the words Bessie had spoken as they stood together side by side on the grassy slope with their backs turned towards the west: “I wish I were more worthy his devotion;” and of that other more vehement sentence spoken later on during the course of the same evening, when the girl said: “If you tell me to do it this minute, I will stay with you all my life and never marry any one.”

At this juncture Miss Hope dropped her eyeglass once again, and, turning to Heather, said: “Yes, my dear, it is clear as noonday (noonday anywhere out of England), that on the young lady’s part it is a marriage of convenience. How shocked you look! Where have your eyes been not to find out the real state of matters for yourself? I suspected it at the first glance; but then, you and I are two very different people; you are the stupidest, simplest goose I ever had the happiness of meeting.”

And the old lady laid her hand on her niece's shoulder with a not unkindly gesture.

Wise old ladies occasionally take fancies to such stupid, simple young geese as Heather Dudley ; and Miss Hope, who knew Arthur better, perhaps, than anybody in the world, felt sorry for the wife, whose lot, it was impossible for her to avoid seeing, had not been cast in pleasant places.

But what, you may ask, did that matter, if Heather herself were unconscious of the fact ?

My reader, do you think the blind man, born blind, can yet remain ignorant for ever that others are able to look on the blue heavens and the green earth ? Do you think the mute comes in due time to have no comprehension that his fellows enjoy a gift withheld from him ? Do you imagine the deaf have no understanding of all which has been denied to them ? Do you suppose the childless never listen for the sound of little feet that God has decreed shall patter across no floor towards their arms outstretched to greet them ? Do you believe the spinster never considers what her lot might have been, when she looks around and sees other women happily married, and sitting by no lonely

fires, as she is doomed to do, through the years, the long, solitary, uneventful years? Do you not understand that in due time the eye must behold, and the heart long—that the fruit eaten so many thousand years ago by our common mother, *must* be tasted sooner or later in its bitterness by all who are born of woman, and who would attain to the full stature of man?

On the branches of the tree still hangs that which gives knowledge of good and evil; and till the hand have grasped, and the mind received, no life can be called perfect, no human being become as a god, comprehending, not merely the mystery of good and evil, but also all the joy and all the sorrow which that mystery involves.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN HEATHER'S DRESSING-ROOM.

TAKEN as a whole, the incongruous ingredients brought together at Berrie Down Hollow did not form a peculiarly agreeable social dish. In one respect it might have been called a kind of haggis, but the result proved that what may be made palatable in cookery, cannot always be tried domestically.

The oatmeal and the vegetables, the mincemeat and the savoury stuffing, refused to amalgamate at the daily dinner-table, and, as is usual in such cases, each guest thought the absence of his neighbours the only thing needed to ensure perfect comfort and happiness at the board.

It is a way people have — this of thinking all God's creatures bores excepting themselves — of

imagining certain pleasant places on earth were made for their especial delectation, and that every other man, woman, or child, who sets foot within the enclosure, should be ousted out, and prosecuted for trespass.

There are common lands on which the majority of mankind may browse if they will, but they must leave the sunny green slopes, the sweet clover-fields, the well-fenced paddock, for the gratification and comfort of the elect; and perhaps the most curious social problem of the day is to notice how, amongst saints and sinners alike, one common idea prevails,—the former believing they have a right to heaven, the latter that they have a right to earth.

Each saint thinks that other saints have no right or title to be pushing themselves forward into the heavenly kingdom; each sinner thinks his fellow-sinner should remain at home, and not strive to gain an entrance where he is most decidedly *de trop*.

Any one who has noticed the disgust of this world's elect at the sight of any one whom they do not chance to like, seated opposite to them at dinner, will have no difficulty in understanding how hard it

would be to get into heaven, if man had any power in the matter of rejection or selection. Easier a thousand times for a camel to pass through the needle's eye, than for him who was judged by his fellow to obtain ingress there.

It is not profane to argue from analogy, even on sacred subjects, and when we see how man would deal with man in life, it is not difficult to guess how man would deal, if he could, with man after death.

"Me—me—place for me ! make room for me ! you surely care for me ! you will certainly be glad to see me !" is the cry here ; and is it too much to assume that in the secret souls of men it is the cry for hereafter ?

I am certain it was so at all events with Heather's guests : if they could have kept each other, not merely out of Berrie Down, but out of heaven, they would have done it.

To say that Miss Hope hated the entire of the Cuthbert connection would be to use too mild a word. To say that Mr. and Mrs. Black, Mrs. Ormson, and Miss Ormson, stank in her nostrils, and that the younger Dudleys stank likewise, though with a lesser offensiveness, would fail to convey an

idea of the state of the lady's real feelings on the subject of her brother-in-law's second marriage; whilst by Mrs. Black, Mrs. Ormson, Bessie, and the younger Dudleys, Miss Hope's dislike was returned with ample interest—honestly paid in kind.

But not here did the dislikes end. With all her heart Mrs. Black wished her sister, Mrs. Ormson, at the antipodes; while with all Mrs. Ormson's heart she wished, not merely Mrs. Black, but also her own husband, Mr. Ormson, at New Zealand. If the gods had known much about human nature—which, judging from results, we may conclude they do not—they would have mated Mr. Black with Mrs. Ormson, Mr. Ormson with Mrs. Black.

“There would have been the wife for me,” Mr. Black stated one day, in strict confidence, to Heather, “but she was secured, ma'am—snapped up.”

How badly off Heather thought mankind must have been for wives, when two of the sex considered Mrs. Ormson a desirable helpmeet, she did not deem it needful to state. One virtue of Arthur Dudley's wife was, that she knew when to hold her tongue,—an incalculable advantage in a woman, when such silence does not arise from indifference or stupidity :

Heather was neither indifferent nor stupid, but she possessed that one great gift of discretion, without which, as Solomon says (and we may safely consider him an authority), "beauty is to a woman but as a jewel in a swine's snout."

And Heaven knows there was need both for discretion and patience, in those days, at Berrie Down!

There are some people with whom everybody can agree, and Heather, unhappily for herself, chanced to be of that exceptional number.

If Mrs. Ormson did not like her—and she did not, for the simple and explicit reason, as she informed all whom it might concern, that Mrs. Dudley "was not one of her sort"—still she was quite unable to resist taking her into her confidence, and telling her all Mr. Ormson's shortcomings, all Bessie's delinquencies, all her maternal anxieties, all Mrs. Black's follies, all the young Marsden's sins, all the indignities which Miss Hope had heaped upon the devoted head of the late Squire Dudley's second wife.

"Just as she would treat you, if you had not a spirit of your own," finished Mrs. Ormson, which

speech was the more amusing, as Heather, unhappily, had not a spirit of her own, but let the whole party trample over her at their own sweet wills.

Then Mrs. Black would, in her weak, limp way, intrude on Heather's only really quiet hour, by knocking at her dressing-room door, and asking if she might come in for a comfortable chat, "for really everything seems so peaceful when I am here with you alone, that I could stay upstairs for ever;" an arrangement, the very mention of which filled Heather's heart with a terrible despair.

After a time Bessie would, much to Mrs. Black's chagrin, appear on the stage, and offer to dress Mrs. Dudley's hair,—an offer Heather always gladly accepted, since Bessie's chatter seemed infinitely preferable to Mrs. Black's inane repinings.

"Lord bless me, aunt," Miss Ormson was wont to say, with a vehemence of expression which afforded a strong contrast to the sentimental discourses concerning her own life and lives in general that had delighted Alick Dudley, "what do you want that you have not got? If I had your money," with a strong emphasis on the personal pronouns, "and no children" (this fact was very fennel in the cup of

Mrs. Black's existence), "I would enjoy myself, see if I would not."

"Ah, Bessie!" Mrs. Black was wont to reply, "money is all very well while it lasts, and it does not last long, you know, but sympathy is better."

"Oh, bother sympathy!" Bessie replied—if she had been a man she would have said something a great deal stronger—"what good is it, and what do you want people to sympathize about?"

"When you are married, child, perhaps you will know," answered Mrs. Black, vaguely; whereupon Bessie asserted:

"If any husband bullied me, aunt, as uncle bullies you, I would soon let him know the difference. He would not care to try the experiment with me twice."

"It is easy for you to talk," said Mrs. Black, feebly.

"Not in the least easier than it would be for me to act," answered Bessie, strong in her youth and health, giving various pulls to Heather's hair during the course of the conversation, which might be considered as special marks of admiration, put in to attract Mrs. Dudley's notice. "I'd like to see my

mother submit to the one-half you bear. Believe me, aunt, Griseldas are not thought much of by modern husbands. If any Griselda of the present day went home 'smockless,' that is,—if such a thing would be tolerated by our 'intelligent' police,—she might stay smockless all the days of her life afterwards, whilst her liege lord committed bigamy, or flaunted about with some other woman clothed in velvets and satins."

"I do not know what you are talking about, Bessie," Mrs. Black would make answer.

"About a certain Griselda, who was, as Lally says, 'a fool,' and lived in verse—how many centuries ago, Heather?"

"How should I tell?" asked Mrs. Dudley.

"Say eight or ten, that is near enough," went on Bessie. "She was a woman, and her husband a man. Like many women, she was, as I have said, a fool, and he, like many men, was a brute. There you have the whole story, aunt; it reads a trifle like your own."

"But, my dear Bessie, your uncle is not a brute," ventured Mrs. Black.

"I am delighted to hear it," Bessie answered.

"He is a little rough, to be sure," Mrs. Black went on, "and has no appreciation, no sympathy, as I said before; but, while he has money, if he could clothe me in cloth of gold, he would do it."

"You may be very glad he cannot," answered Bessie, "for cloth of gold would be not merely very expensive, but also very unbecoming."

"How you talk, child!"

"Good gracious, aunt! what do you think my tongue was given to me for, except to talk?" asked the young lady. And so on, and so on, till Heather, sometimes amused, but far oftener wearied, would entreat Mrs. Black to take Bessie away with her, to which little *ruse* Bessie lent herself, not unwillingly, throwing back a look at Mrs. Dudley, which said, as plainly as a look could say, "You would let me stay, if it were not to get rid of her."

"How can you think of allowing those people to pester you as they do?" this was Miss Hope; "you are far too amiable; if I were mistress here, you would see whether they should torment me. I would make use of them instead. Each of the aunts should have one of the girls constantly with her on a visit,

and Mr. Black and Mr. Ormson should take the two boys into their respective offices. The boys do not wish to be with their uncles, is that what you say? Well, Heather, I really do wonder at your weakness. What have the boys' wishes to do in the matter? Is Arthur to keep them for ever? Are they never to go out into the world, and try to earn an honest living? Are you to have your house full of another woman's children all your life, and be worried to death with them?"

"Please not to talk like that, Miss Hope," Heather said, piteously; "the children must go some day, I know, but without them Berrie Down will never seem the same Berrie Down to me."

"Do you mean to say you like having them here?" Miss Hope inquired, with a gradual crescendo.

"You do not know what they have been to me," Heather answered, the colour coming up into her face, as it always did when she was either excited or distressed. "They have been assistants, comforters, companions, friends! As for Alick"—here the sweet, low voice faltered—"he has been my very right hand; he has thought for me, worked for me. I have had but to wish a thing, and if

Alick heard, and it were possible to accomplish, I never wished vainly. He is going: it is right he should. I have striven for him to go; but I shall feel lost without him. Already it is to me as though some one in the house were dying."

Miss Hope solaced herself with a chocolate cream at this point. As some people take snuff, so Arthur Dudley's aunt took chocolate. Apparently it stimulated her thoughts, for she said:

"You are an original, if ever there were one."

"Do you think I do not mean what I say?" asked Heather, uncertain what the observation implied. "Do you think I do not love my husband's brothers and sisters? Do you imagine any woman ever found such brothers and sisters before—such bright, willing helpers—such unselfish, loving, cheerful boys and girls?"

"I think, my dear, any person who could not be happy with you could not be happy with any one. You certainly are a very sweet creature—don't blush, or, yes, rather do, it is becoming to you. I saw a face exactly like yours in a studio at Rome last year. Did you ever know an artist of the name of Whiteman? No?—ah! then he could not have

fallen in love with you in years gone by, and he making money out of your beauty now. What did that murmur mean?—that you are not beautiful? Stuff! Excuse me, but it is stuff! I suppose you will allow that I know a pretty face when I see it? and I declare you are beautiful—twenty times more so than that Bessie Ormson, whom I should not have in the house an hour, if I were in your shoes.”

“I like Bessie greatly,” Heather remarked.

“Of course you do—you like every one—a flirty, flighty miss, who would take up with your favourite Alick if there were no other man in the way, or with Arthur, or——”

“Why, Arthur and she never speak a civil word to each other,” Mrs. Dudley objected.

“That is the way with all those kind of people—they begin with quarrelling and end by loving. Of course, you know your own business best; but I would not have her here. I am sure I have heard of such things, and Arthur is such a weak simpleton!”

“Miss Hope!”

“Don’t be indignant, my dear. Before ever you knew Arthur I knew him, and what I say is true. He is even so weak that he has not the remotest

idea what a treasure of a wife fate sent him. Arthur is amiable enough, and headstrong enough, in some things; but still I would not trust him too far. Look how Mrs. Ormson winds him round her finger! Well, if Bessie were to change her tactics, and humour him, she might——”

“It is not right of you,” interrupted Heather. “Indeed, Miss Hope, it is not right; you should not say such things of my husband and your nephew; and as for that poor innocent girl——”

“Innocent!” interposed Miss Hope, in her turn. “An innocent that could buy and sell you, and me too—ay, and make money out of both of us! I would have none of her. Not but what the girl is an amusing enough companion, and clever too; and if she had loved this man—this Gilbert Harcourt—and settled down, she might have become, in her station, a respectable enough member of society; but she does not care for him—there’s the misery.”

“I cannot imagine what makes you think Bessie does not care for him,” persisted Heather.

“I imagine what my eyes tell me to be the truth, and nothing more,” answered Miss Hope. “She is too anxious to please him, far too careful of what

she says, much too ready to do what he asks her, keeps that sweet temper of hers too much under—is, in fact, much too good and saintlike for a happy young woman. Why, my dear, they ought to have tiffs and sulking fits, quarrels and reconciliations—to part eternally one hour, and be kissing like a couple of stupids the next. But why do I talk like this to you, who have gone through it all yourself?"

Heather made no answer, but, turning a little towards the window, removed her face from Miss Hope's observation. Had she gone through it; had she ever held such a power over Arthur as this indicated; had she herself even ever gone through the heat and the cold, the crater and the snowdrift; had she ever smiled those smiles, and wept those tears, which a woman only smiles and weeps when she is dreaming her love-dreams; was this mystery, which she had been groping about after blindly for years, going to be revealed to her at last; was what Miss Hope said true; was the love-play that she saw acted out every hour before her eyes, true but as regarded one of the performers in it? If it were so, what then had that play been which decided the fate of her own life—a farce, a tragedy—which? Was

light, after the blessed darkness of years, only breaking to reveal to her this? Were other human lives but mirrors reflecting back the sad, pitiful face of her own married experience? What had come to her—what was coming to her? Knowledge! and, with an undefined dread of what knowledge might bring with it, Heather, standing by the open window, looking adown the smooth green slope, and so away to the far still country lying off in the distance, silently prayed that she might hear and understand no more—that as knowledge had come so late, it might never come at all.

It was growing upon her that Arthur did not love her—had never loved her. Everybody said he did not guess how good a wife had fallen to his share; and little as, in her modesty, she believed there was to call “good” about her, still Heather thought that if Arthur really cared for her he would overrate rather than underrate her better qualities, and try to be satisfied with her endeavours to please him.

Instead of which, let her do what she would, Arthur found fault; before strangers, too, who took her part, and thus drove the nail home.

“I cannot think what has changed him so much,”

the poor wife thought, her eyes filled with tears that prevented her seeing any object distinctly. "He used to be so different;" which was true to this extent, namely, that the writing on Arthur Dudley's mind had remained almost undistinguishable till it came to be passed through the social fire, which made every character traced on it clear even to eyes that would rather not have read there any word, likely in the future to affect injuriously Heather's happiness or Heather's peace.

"And another thing,"—it was Miss Hope again speaking, which brought Heather back from a long vague journey to the realities of life—"I would not have that Mr. Black staying here; of course, as I said before, you know your own business best, but I know how it will all end. That man and Mrs. Ormson, between them, will make Arthur dissatisfied."

"He has long been so," remarked Heather.

"Let me finish my sentence, if you please," proceeded Miss Hope—"will make Arthur dissatisfied and induce him to join in some senseless project, which will ruin him. Ruin him," repeated the lady. "You know what that means, I suppose; and when

that day comes, remember, I am not going to help him. You can tell him what I say."

"I would much rather not," Mrs. Dudley observed.

"But I beg that you will, should opportunity offer. Tell him I have sunk all my money in an annuity, and that I shall not have a sixpence to leave or give to anybody."

"Dear Miss Hope, I trust you do not think that we——"

"I think nothing ill of *you*," interrupted the old lady. "And, for that matter, I do not think Arthur mercenary, either. He could have packed all those children off with their mother years ago, had he not been generous as well as foolish; but he is just the man first to get rid of all his own money, and then to think he can get rid of all mine too, so disabuse his mind of that idea, will you, like a dear sweet soul?"

"As I am confident such an idea never entered his mind, there can be no necessity for me to disabuse him of it," said Heather, a little stiffly.

"Well, when it does enter it, do not depend on me for help. What, cross?" added Miss Hope. "Frowning is not at all becoming to you, Heather;

and I did not think your eyes could have held so dark a look as I see in them now."

"Because everything seems to be going wrong," Mrs. Dudley said passionately; "because one comes to me with advice, and another with a caution, till I am sick and tired of both; because no person seems to like any other person; because, for peace sake, I have even to keep my children constantly out of sight; because there are dreadful things said, and dreadful things thought; because I am miserable, and everybody tries, I do believe, to make me more miserable still."

"Sit down," said Miss Hope; and when Heather seemed inclined to rebel, the old lady pushed her with gentle force into the nearest chair. "Mrs. Dudley, I am going to talk to you;" she proceeded, but then she paused, and involuntarily, as it seemed, put another chocolate into her mouth.

"Take one?" she said, handing the box to Heather.

"Not any, thank you;" the brown eyes looked very defiant at the moment, and Heather's tone was defiant also.

"You do not like chocolate?"

"I detest it," was the explicit answer.

"It is an acquired taste, and you have acquired very few tastes as yet, I fancy," said Miss Hope; "you have much to learn."

"I am not bound to learn, I suppose," was Mrs. Dudley's reply.

"There is a school, my dear, in which it does not much matter whether the pupils be apt or not—willing or unwilling, they cannot help but learn. I should rather like to keep you out of that school; it is a very absurd thing for an old woman who has no heart and no sympathy to say; but it is true, for all that. I am very fond of you, Heather Dudley."

"You are very kind, Miss Hope."

"You are not in a mood to think so at this moment," said Arthur's aunt; "but wait a little. I have known your husband longer than you have; I am slightly better acquainted with the world, and the men and women in it, than you are; and I want to tell you, that if Arthur and Mr. Black are much together, my nephew will make ducks and drakes of Berrie Down, and you and he and the children won't have sixpence a-year."

It was not a pleasant picture to contemplate. Let

a woman be as little sordid as she please, still the interest on sixpence paid quarterly must seem an insufficient income; and Heather sat silent for a minute considering Miss Hope's words. She was a wise wife, though a loyal; and though her companion had hurt and irritated her, still she would not let the bark containing Arthur Dudley's fortune go down, if timely knowledge could prevent its doing so.

"What is the danger?" she asked at length; "what is the precise danger you think an intimacy with Mr. Black involves?"

"His drawing Arthur into some of his schemes," was the reply. "You know, of course, Mr. Black is a man who has always lived by his wits."

"No, I do not," answered Heather. "I should have thought they would have yielded him an insufficient income."

"On the contrary, they have yielded him a very good income," said Miss Hope; "and for this reason, that he cannot be put down. His impudence and, I may add, his energy, are inexhaustible. He is like a cork—he will float where much more valuable people founder. Now, if Arthur go with him, Arthur will founder."

"How do you mean, go with him?" asked Heather.

"Join him, embark in any of his numerous speculations. Wait a moment; I have got a letter concerning our friend in my pocket. Let me turn the key in your door first, to keep out some of those irrepressible people whom I hear coming in search of you. I am not going to show you that letter, but I will read you a few paragraphs out of it. There, I told you—knock away—who's there?—what do you want?"

"May I come in?" asked Mrs. Ormson, vainly trying to open the door. "Is Heather to be seen?"

"No," almost screamed Miss Hope; "she is lying down with a very bad headache, and must not be disturbed."

"May I not speak to her for a moment?"

"Certainly not; I will come downstairs presently and hear all you have got to say."

"That you won't," thought Mrs. Ormson.

"Now, do go away, please Mrs. Ormson, and tell your daughter not to come worrying. There, that's a good riddance; how frightened you look, child!"

"She will be so angry—so offended."

"Let her be offended. Is the house not your

own? Have you no right to ten minutes' quiet in the day? Are you to be at the beck and call of a parcel of people who would like you to slave for their amusement? I'm out of patience with it. And, besides, your head *is* aching. Don't contradict me ; I know better."

"I had no intention of contradicting you," Heather answered. "Now about the letter, Miss Hope—that is, if you think it quite right for me to hear it."

In reply to which last clause, Arthur's aunt told Heather not to be absurd, but to listen attentively.

"Respecting Mr. Black, I should recommend great caution. He is a person who has had almost every known iron in the fire, and burnt other men's fingers with all of them. He has made a composition with his creditors three times a—(composition means, that if you owe a person a hundred pounds, you pay him ten shillings, and the debt is done with." This, Miss Hope.) "Passed through the Insolvent Court thrice, and been bankrupt twice—(bankruptcies, and insolvencies, and compositions all pretty nearly come to the same thing." Miss Hope in explanation again.) "He has embarked in

almost every trade which can be commenced without either knowledge or capital. He is suspected of having been connected with several of the shilling swindles—(that is, send twelve stamps, and by return ——”) Enlightened Miss Hope!

“I know about that,” said Heather, proud at last of being acquainted with some of the world’s wickedness; “for I sent the twelve stamps, and got back a reply advising me to sell baked potatoes.”

“Very probably Mr. Black wrote it,” suggested Miss Hope; “but to go on. Several of the shilling swindles, and particularly with one, which was carried on very successfully in the City, and which realised a very large sum to the persons engaged in it. I know about that,” confided Miss Hope, repeating Heather’s words. “The shares were five shillings each, and I took fifty, lost my twelve pounds ten, and think I bought my wisdom cheap. Mr. Black is at present engaged in promoting and carrying through four or five different companies. For one of these, a very large undertaking, he is looking up directors, and has, I am told, got some good names—amongst others,

that of Mr. Allan Stewart. What makes you look so astonished, child?"

"Allan Stewart was the name of my godfather," explained Heather. "He had property near Layford."

"This Mr. Stewart is old, rich, and cross," said Miss Hope.

"And our Mr. Stewart was rich and cross likewise," Heather answered; whereupon Miss Hope laid down her letter, and wondered if the two could by any possibility be one and the same.

"Did you ever happen to hear him speak of a nephew called Douglas Aymescourt?" inquired Miss Hope.

"I never heard him speak about any one," was Heather's reply; "for, before I could speak myself, he and my father had some little difference in opinion, which finally swelled into such a quarrel that all visiting ceased. But who is Mr. Aymescourt? I have heard of him, though not from Mr. Stewart."

"What have you heard about him?" Miss Hope asked.

"Nothing, excepting that you knew him."

“And who told you I knew him?”

“Arthur; at least, he and Mrs. Ormson were talking here one evening, and there was something said about your knowing him and his wife. Who are they?”

“Well, Mr. Aymescourt is Mr. Stewart’s nephew, and Mrs. Aymescourt is Mrs. Aymescourt,” answered Miss Hope, shortly.

“But who was she?” persisted Heather.

“She was a Miss Laxton in the days when I knew anything about her,” said Miss Hope; “a handsome girl, with a detestable temper and a fine fortune. They say she and her husband live like cat and dog; but all this has nothing to do with my friend’s letter. Listen to it, please;” and Miss Hope proceeded: “There can be no doubt but that, were this company once formed, Mr. Black, and probably many others, would make a good thing of it; but the difficulty in carrying it through appears to be want of capital for advertising and various other expenses. Mr. Stewart, as you are aware, is not a person likely to give away his name uselessly. I have no doubt he is to be liberally paid for allowing it to appear on the Direction.

“Paid for his name? What is the translation of that?” inquired Heather.

“The translation of that is, Mr. Stewart will be either paid in shares or money for allowing his name to appear on the Direction,” said Miss Hope, who, for a woman that had bought her experience for twelve pounds ten, seemed wonderfully at home in the intricacies of City matters; “and if the gentleman in whom you are interested,” proceeded Arthur’s aunt, once again reading from the letter, “be, as you seem to imply, not merely a person inexperienced in business, but also speculative, there can be no doubt Mr. Black’s purpose is to obtain money from him in order to float his company.”

Here Miss Hope folded up her manuscript, and looked at Heather.

“But we have no money,” said the latter, answering Miss Hope’s look.

“No, but you have Berrie Down.”

“And you think Arthur would be so mad——?” began Heather.

“I am sure he will be so mad, if some one do not put a stop to these private walks and talks—these

wanderings over the fields — these confidential whisperings.”

“Shall you read him that letter, Miss Hope?” ventured the poor wife, timidly.

“Do you think I am mad, too, Heather Dudley?” asked Miss Hope; “do you think I want every word in it to be repeated to Mr. Black? No; you must meet influence with influence; you must checkmate stratagem by stratagem. For Arthur’s sake and for the sake of your children, you must avert this great evil which is coming upon you. This man must go, and Mrs. Ormson also, and Arthur must not follow them to London. Berrie Down is not gone yet; but Berrie Down will go, if you do not exert yourself to save it.”

For a moment Heather bent her head on her hands before she replied; then, “Berrie Down is not mine, to keep or to lose?” she said.

“No; but you can prevent Arthur losing it.”

“How?” Heather lifted her eyes, and looked straight into Miss Hope’s face as she asked this question.

“How?” repeated her companion; “why, you must talk to Arthur, find out what he is thinking of

joining ; and, if it be as we imagine, prevent his doing anything so utterly suicidal."

"And you think I could prevent him?"

"If you have any influence at all over him, and I suppose no other human being has so much, and like to exert it, I should think you might."

"Miss Hope, I have no influence."

Many a time afterwards, Heather marvelled how she came to utter that sentence,—utter it as calmly as though no bitterness lurked in the words. She marvelled how everything grew clear to her in a moment, as it seemed ; how, for the time, she appeared to be another person looking calmly and dispassionately at her own position, and forming a conclusion concerning that position. The years came and stood before her then—the years during which she had loved and laboured in vain, in which she had spent her strength for nought, in which she had been happy and unsuspecting, in which she had never been other than vaguely conscious of a want in which, though her life had always lacked the principal ingredient all lives require before they can be pronounced happy, she had yet believed herself so—believed that hers was a lot to be desired.

The years came and stood before her, and each had the same story to tell,—that during its course she had grown no more necessary to her husband, no nearer to his confidence, no dearer to his heart, no more appreciated by him.

At last, the question which had long been tormenting her was put in a tangible form, the enigma that had puzzled her was solved in a single sentence spoken by her own lips,—

“I have no influence.”

Miss Hope did not immediately answer. She sat looking in the sad, lovely face before her, till at last she arrived at a perfect conviction of the truth conveyed in Heather’s words. In all her life before she had never met a woman who possessed no power either to lead or drive, to coax, to flatter, to delude or to bully a husband; and, although she saw Arthur did not appreciate Heather, she had not dreamed of his wife having not the slightest influence over him.

“So that is the way of it,” she said, after a long pause.

“That is the way of it,” Heather answered, rising as she spoke.

Next moment she dropped back into her chair. "It is nothing. I am not going to faint," she said, detaining Miss Hope, who was darting off for water. "Only this talk has tried me. Don't you understand?"

Miss Hope was not much given to such demonstrations, but she knelt down on the floor beside Heather, and twined her arms round her nephew's wife.

"Lay your head on my shoulder, dear," she whispered; and Heather drooped it wearily as she was desired.

She did not cry. She did not make any lamentation; but she sat with her head drooped, thinking out her trouble, vaguely wondering through it all, whether—when Mrs. Ormson said, as she was often kind enough to do, "Arthur ought to have married a rich wife," and when Miss Hope, kneeling on the ground, murmured "You are too good for Arthur; he ought to have married a virago,"—they had mutually in their minds' eyes Mrs. Aymescourt, *née* Laxton.

CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE BIOGRAPHY.

IT is a curious question to consider how very frequently the same matter is being discussed at the same time by different people; to notice how a similar idea is germinated in utterly dissimilar minds, and becomes for a period the subject of animated discussion between various pairs and groups of people. There is no reason, so far as we can tell, why two men should talk on any given topic at any given time; but, supposing that two men do so converse, we may be morally certain that two other people, and many other twos besides, either have got, or immediately will get, hold of the theme also, and commence tearing it to rags straight away.

Various questions go the round of families, little

communities, large masses, the bulk of the population, the inhabitants of countries, all about the same time. Different subjects seem to come in the air like influenza, cholera, the cattle plague, without rhyme or reason ; they affect the whole of society to a greater or less extent ; and when they are exhausted, another idea, like another epidemic, takes the place of its predecessor.

There is no accounting for these things, no accounting for the fact that often, when you are thinking or talking of a friend long absent, he walks into your chambers, or stops you in the street ; no accounting for the very disagreeable fact, that if you find a creditor straying into your mind, if you begin wondering why he has given you peace for so long, the next post is almost certain to bring a little reminder from him ; no accounting for the ill-fortune which if, Jones, shall we say, take to writing a memoir of Fair Rosamond, sets all the Browns, Smiths, and Robinsons writing books about that frail beauty also.

Once upon a time, two people, unknown to each other, resident as far apart as Northumberland and Cornwall, shall we say, composed two melodies, and,

behold, when a common friend heard the twain, they were identical. It is the same with works of imagination: a dozen people, writing novels in one year, are almost certain to handle identical subjects with a difference.

People cannot be original either, even in their travels. Imagine that Jones, exhausted with his literary propping-up of Fair Rosamond's reputation, says secretly to his own soul, "I will eschew my kind, and take holiday where the heart of man never dreamed of taking holiday before, in the smallest county in England." He thinks he has conceived a new thing, yet Smith is on the station when he gets to King's Cross, with travelling-bag labelled "Oakham," also. It is a marvel the pair do not kill each other; but, instead of that, they exchange cigars, and the newspapers, and stop at the same hotel.

It is a law of nature, we may conclude, this rotatory cropping-up of ideas, this constant evidence that nothing we do, or say, or think, is in itself perfectly new or original; and, however unpleasant many natural laws may be, still we cannot get rid of them, nor escape from their control.

And, indeed—though we always are—why should we even be astonished at these coincidences? When we see one primrose on a bank, we may feel pretty certain there are other primroses not far off. They come in their season like the thoughts of men; they dot the hedgerows, and spring amongst the woods; they show their faces boldly by the road-side, and they hide them shyly amid the grass; they are sold in the market-place, and the children gather them for posies; they bloom; they are sought after; they are taken to grace lordly rooms; they remain unseen; they wither; they pass away; they are forgotten; like the thoughts of the best men, they but serve their purpose and depart, to make way for fresh flowers, and for fresh thinkers; for there is nothing new under the sun.

All of which may help to explain the fact, that although Mr. Black's latest financial undertaking resembled the root of a primrose as little as any two things on the face of the earth could do by possibility, still his scheme bore many flowers of speech in Berrie Down Hollow.

On the day when Miss Hope broke ground in Heather's dressing-room, many other people broke

up the same ground, though with different intentions, and in different language.

Gilbert told Bessie how Mr. Black had offered him the business of a "large company" (Mr. Harcourt was a young solicitor); at least, said he would try to get it for him, whereupon Bessie remarked she hoped it would turn out a good company, for she thought, during the course of his life, her uncle had often got into very questionable society.

Likewise, lying on the drawing-room sofa, Mrs. Ormson discoursed to her sister about business, and supposed she would soon be riding in her carriage now, and grow too proud to find her way to Guildford Street at all!

Speaking of his new prospects to Alick, Mr. Ormson, an utterly inoffensive individual, remarked, he hoped the lad "would not let himself be led away by Mr. Black, or made dissatisfied with his small salary, for, whatever some people might imagine, fortunes were not to be picked up out of the gutter; at least, not with clean hands," added Mr. Ormson, after a pause;—while riding side by side with Lord Kemms along Berrie Down Lane, Mr. Compton Raidsford, beholding Arthur Dudley and Mr. Black

walking together up and down one of the broad green meadows, shaded by a pleasant hedgerow, remarked to his companion :—

“I hope Dudley won’t suffer that fellow to drag him into any of his rotten companies. If he do, Berrie Down Hollow will soon be in the market.”

“In which case I shall buy it,” said his lordship.

“I do not think you will, excepting at something considerably beyond its value, for I have set my heart upon it too,” observed Mr. Raidsford; whereupon the pair laughed, and Lord Kemms, reverting to Mr. Black, informed his companion “he had been asking him to allow his name to appear on the Direction.”

“Which Direction?” inquired Mr. Raidsford. “He is floating, or rather trying to float, several companies. For which of them does he solicit the honour of Lord Kemms’ name?”

“For the ‘Protector Bread and Flour Company,’” answered his lordship.

“Oh!” exclaimed Mr. Raidsford. Then, after a moment’s silence, he asked, “And what terms does he offer? I suppose there is no secret about the matter?”

"None that I am aware of," was the reply ; "at least, he made no mention of secrecy to me. He offered two hundred paid-up shares, and he showed me names he had got, that, I confess, made me hesitate about refusing. In fact, I meant to ask your advice. You know, every one goes in for these kind of things now-a-days, and some people must make money out of them."

"Yes, but not people who are associated with Mr. Black," replied Compton Raidsford.

"And yet he has got the name of one man who is considered unusually wary in his investments, Mr. Allan Stewart."

"Allan Stewart," repeated Mr. Raidsford ; "now you do surprise me." And he rode on for a while, turning the matter over in his mind.

"And he expects to get Douglas Croft."

"The deuce he does !"

"So you see it is all in the family, at least in one branch of it," continued his lordship.

"Ay, and if I were Lord Kemms, it might stay in one branch of it for me," was the quick reply.

"But still money is made out of these kind of things," said Lord Kemms, harking back to the point from which he had started.

“And lost,” added Mr. Raidsford, quietly.

“But I could not lose money.”

“No, but you might be the cause of making others lose it,” Mr. Raidsford observed.

“I did not think of that,” said Lord Kemms.

“Every person should think of that before lending, giving, or selling his name,” answered Mr. Raidsford, a little bitterly. “Do you not know,” went on this man, who had made every sixpence of his money for himself honestly, “do you not know that you, and such as you, are used by adventurers like Mr. Black for decoy ducks? Could they afford to pay you the sums they do for the sake of mere ornament? No, they use you. They do not use your money, which you will not give them; nor your business capabilities, which you do not possess; nor your influence, which you would not be troubled employing in their behalf; but they use your names. When a half-column advertisement appears in the *Times*, with my Lord This, and Sir Something That, General So and So, and a few esquires, living at Parks, Courts, and the rest of it, on the Direction, the British public comes up for shares like sheep to the slaughter. It does not matter to you when the bubble bursts, but it matters

to widows and orphans, to country clergymen, to governesses, to all the poor deluded creatures, in fact, who have invested money in the undertaking."

"That is supposing the thing fail, Mr. Raidsford," remarked Lord Kemms.

"I cannot suppose anything likely to succeed, my lord, in which Mr. Black acts as fogleman," was the reply.

"Do you know much of Mr. Black?"

"Yes, I have known *about* him all my life—in fact, at one time, I did business with him—for he was town-traveller for a house which supplied us with tools. He was always a clever, pushing fellow, possessed of a tongue that would have persuaded a man almost to buy old castings for steel (here Lord Kemms smiled as though he understood the meaning of the illustration), and I think he might have done well, if he could have been but content; however, he could not. His employers found out he was doing a little business for himself, and making a connexion while receiving a salary from them; so they turned him adrift, and then he started on his own account. If he had been honest, he might still have succeeded; but he fell into a bad habit of

supplying extraordinarily bad goods, while selling at ordinary prices. He had a small warehouse in Clerkenwell in those days, and certainly never was above his business, I will say that for him—am I wearying you, my lord?”

“No, the biography is interesting.”

“After a time, things began to go badly with him—” proceeded Mr. Raidsford; but here he suddenly paused—“They are crossing the field so as to meet us,” he said; “suppose I finish my story afterwards.”

“No, they are not coming to meet us,” said Lord Kemms, “they only turned so as to make sure of who we were—excuse me for a moment, but I want to speak to Mr. Dudley;” and his lordship shouted out a greeting to the Squire, who, standing on his dignity, only raised his hat in acknowledgment, and resumed his conversation with Mr. Black.

But Lord Kemms was not a man to be so easily diverted from his purpose. Backing his horse to the other side of the road, he put him at the ditch, and next moment was cantering across the field towards his neighbour.

“Don’t bring an action for trespass against me,

Mr. Dudley," he said, laughing; "you are so hard to catch, I could not resist the opportunity of speaking to you about that filly your brother was training. Do you really wish to keep her? she is exactly what I want for my niece."

With his hands buried in his pockets, Squire Dudley stood silent, looking at the mane of Lord Kemms' Black Knight.

Truth was, brought face to face with this would-be purchaser, he did not know exactly what answer to make.

"If you really mean to keep her," proceeded Lord Kemms, growing a little hot and uncomfortable, "of course I can only apologise for my mistake; but the fact is, I heard you were going to sell her, and—and—being neighbours, and so forth, I thought you might as well sell her to me as to anybody else."

Still Arthur did not speak—and there is no knowing when he would have spoken to the purpose, had not Mr. Black rushed in with—

"I suppose it resolves itself into a money question, my lord—of course I know nothing about the horse or the offer, but my experience is that everything *is* a money question now-a-days."

“If that be the case—” began Lord Kemms, good humouredly—but Arthur cut across his sentence :

“It is not so with me,” he said, deliberately turning his back on Mr. Black, so as to cut him out of the conversation ; “it is not so with me. For the sake of a few pounds, I would not haggle and bargain with any man—more especially your lordship. I did intend to keep the filly—not exactly for my own riding, but because I thought, and think still, she would be worth three times over what you offered me in another twelve months ; but I have changed my mind about the matter, and, if you like to have her on the terms you offered before, I will send her over to the Park to-night. She is fit for any light weight to ride ; my brother can break a horse better than anyone I know.”

Arthur spoke rapidly : there was a look in his face, and a decision about his manner, Lord Kemms had never noticed before ; but then, to be sure, his opportunities of witnessing the Squire’s moods had been few and far between.

From the Squire it was natural Lord Kemms’ glance should wander to Mr. Black, and written on

that gentleman's expressive countenance, the peer read such intense disgust at Arthur's folly, that he could scarcely refrain from laughing.

"Thank you, Mr. Dudley," he said, gathering up his reins and stroking the Black Knight's neck as he spoke ; "thank you very much. I shall be very proud of Nellie, and think her a great addition to my stud—she is a perfect beauty !"

"I would not sell her to you, if I did not believe her to be every bit as good as she looks," answered the Squire.

"Of *that* I am certain," was the reply ; and Lord Kemms held out his hand to Arthur,—a courtesy which he did not think it necessary to extend to Mr. Black.

"Then you will send her over this evening ?" were his last words, as, with a farewell nod to Mr. Black, he galloped across the field to rejoin Mr. Raidsford, whose horse had been regaling itself at the expense of Mr. Dudley's thorn-hedge during the time occupied by the preceding conversation.

"Well, it is no wonder you are a poor man, Dudley," remarked Mr. Black, the moment Lord Kemms was out of earshot ; "he would have given

you fifty guineas more for that Nellie creature, as easily as fifty pence."

"I am not a horse-dealer," returned the Squire, coldly. "And have you not secured what you wanted? You said a hundred pounds would be sufficient to commence your advertising; you have got your hundred pounds, and Nellie is gone."

"You speak as if you regretted her," said Mr. Black.

"Whether I do or not is my concern," was the reply.

"Of course; only, if you do regret her, say the word, and I will go to Runcorn. He would take it up, pretty sharp, I can tell you; only, as I explained, those fellows always want the biggest share for themselves."

"I have sold the mare, and there's an end of it," answered Arthur, resuming his walk up and down the meadow.

"There's the beginning of it," was Mr. Raidsford's somewhat different comment when Lord Kemms told him the result of the interview. "Your cheque will be passed through Mr. Black's bank before the week is over. Well, I am heartily sorry for Dudley.

Even from this simple transaction it is easy to see what the result will prove. A man like that stands no chance with Mr. Peter Black."

"You were telling me Mr. Black's history," suggested Lord Kemms. "We left him in Clerkenwell, on his own account, and not above his business."

"Your lordship must kindly excuse my City slang," answered Mr. Raidsford.

"On the contrary—excuse me—or rather let me assure you my quotations were intended as complimentary, not satirical. Your story interests me immensely. I wish I could relate a man's biography as well."

"Although he stuck to his business," proceeded Mr. Raidsford, without directly replying to his companion's gracious remark, "he fell into difficulties; perhaps, because he did not stick to it solely, but served himself precisely as he had served his employers. Speculated; tried to attend to two things at once, and, as is usual in such cases, neither answered. Then he failed, and passed through the Court."

"The Bankruptcy Court, do you mean?" inquired Lord Kemms.

"No, the Insolvent," was the reply. He has

been through them both more than once. I was in with him the first time for about a couple of hundreds, and I remember the estate paid a shilling in the pound. I have never lost much by him since, however.

“After this whitewashing, he began the world again as clerk to a wine-merchant, in Devonshire Square. While he was in that employment, he met with some man who had a few hundreds, and the pair went into partnership. For a time everything progressed swimmingly, but at last they failed and passed through the Bankruptcy Court, creditably enough, if I recollect rightly.

“Mr. Black next turned up in an alley off Cornhill, as agent for Messrs. Murphy and Hatchford’s celebrated Epping ales. You might think a man who was merely an agent could not well contract business debts; but Mr. Black proved the contrary, and although Messrs. Murphy and Hatchford paid, as it afterwards turned out, rent, taxes, wages, and advertising expenses, Mr. Black made a thorough smash, and was whitewashed again.

“After that, things went very badly with him for a long time. Sometimes he used to do me the

favour of calling at my office and borrowing small sums of money ; and, indeed, I did feel sorry for the fellow in those days, for it seemed as though luck and he had bidden good-bye for ever. He wanted me to give him a berth, but I did not think he was exactly the kind of person I required, and told him so as delicately as I could.

“ ‘If you would only take me for a month,’ he said ; ‘I could get a situation from you.’ ”

“Instead of doing that I gave him a sovereign, and heard no more of his prospects for a considerable time. Occasionally I saw him in the street, looking very seedy and ill-fed, but he never came to my place of business. During that lull I have reason to believe he travelled for a lead-pencil manufacturer, held a situation in a tract repository, was collector to some charitable institution, started a suburban newspaper (all the original matter in which he wrote himself), and had a commission from some glass-house on all the orders he could bring in. Suddenly he fell out of my observation altogether, and for full two years I never even met him in the street. I thought he was dead, in fact, when one day, happening to call about some business at an

office in Alderman's Walk, I met Mr. Black on the staircase, well-dressed, plump as a partridge, fluent and self-sufficient as ever. He was kind enough to stop and speak to me," went on Mr. Raidsford, with an amused smile, "and to tell me he was doing well, remarkably well, indeed. He added, also, he was glad to hear I had got some good contracts, and assured me I possessed his best wishes for my welfare. He said he had fallen into a capital concern, and was managing partner for Hume, Holme, Draycott, and Co.

"Further, without the slightest solicitation on my part,—indeed, without the slightest desire for the information,—he confided to me the fact that he was going to be married to a daughter of Alderman Cuthbert.

"‘Good City connection,’ he added, with a wink, ‘and likelihood of money. If you are ever passing my way, come in and smoke a cigar, will you?’ I never inquired which way his might be, but I said I would, and so we parted. I had a curiosity to know who Hume, Holme, Draycott, and Co. were, and accordingly I discovered that there was no Hume in the firm, and no Holme ; no Draycott, and no Com-

pany, except Mr. Black, who was, indeed, managing and principal partner, and everything, in the concern.

“Then I lost sight of him again; but it is a curious fact about London, at least, about the City, that in it one never is able to lose sight of any person for ever. A man new to London might feel inclined to doubt this fact, but it is perfectly true, I assure you. People seem to move in circles which always bring them back to some given spot. Even the re-appearance of comets like Mr. Black, that one might imagine were governed by no certain law, may safely be predicted, and accordingly I heard of him again. His name came to me in the ordinary way of trade as acceptor of a bill that was offered to me in payment of an account, which bill I refused. Where Hume, Holme, and Draycott had vanished to I never could ascertain; but on that bill he came to me in his own proper identity.

“Soon afterwards he failed once more. I declare when I talk of Peter Black it seems to me he must have been fifty men instead of one.

“Before long, I discovered him managing a small house property for a man in the City, who was

in the habit of purchasing on short repairing leases.

“I will not trouble your lordship with the roguery Mr. Black became acquainted with in that employment. The school was a very bad one, and Mr. Black a very apt pupil.

“‘It is not what I like, you know,’ he said to me, ‘but it is a stepping-stone,’ which opinion proved to be correct, for he stepped from that into the office of a man who had made a fortune by speculating in railway shares. There he would have acquired great experience ; but his principal falling into difficulties, Mr. Black was adrift once more.”

“I never heard such a history,” remarked Lord Kemms ; “what indomitable energy the man must have had !”

“True,” was the reply ; “and yet I do not know whether the man who works hard in some one business day after day, week after week, year after year, have not a greater share of what I should call indomitable energy than Mr. Black. I am not thinking of myself now,” added Mr. Raidsford, noticing his companion smile, “because, of course, there was

plenty of variety in my life, and, though I stuck close to one trade, plenty of variety too; but I was thinking of lots of hard-working men I know who come into the City every day, and see the same people, and do the same work, and go the same rounds, and cheerfully, and by dint of very perseverance, finally conquer fortune; or, at least, earn a competence," which last clause came apparently as an after-thought. "In a life like Mr. Black's, the excitement of the game is almost recompense enough for a man. It is not legitimate work, you know; it is commercial pitch and toss; it is Cockney *rouge et noir*; it is gambling of the worst kind—gambling when the player has everything to gain and nothing to risk. It is the old story, 'heads I win, tails you lose.' That is Mr. Black's system of betting, at all events."

Lord Kemms laughed. "And yet," he said, "even if a man be riding a borrowed horse, we cannot help a certain admiration in seeing him take dangerous leaps. Of course, the life of a trader, who goes round and round on a business treadmill, is more useful, and decidedly more monotonous; but you cannot expect him to command our interest, how-

ever much he may deserve our respect. As for Mr. Black, I own I am charmed with him. If I am not unreasonable, I should like to hear more."

"Once again," resumed Mr. Raidsford, thus entreated, "there is a blank in my knowledge of his history. He referred two or three people to me for his character, and for his means of paying house-rent, which I considered a liberty, but still, unwilling to injure the man, said what I could in his favour. He never came near me himself, however; and I subsequently discovered that he used one of the offices, which my representation enabled him to enter, for one of the many shilling swindles, with which, I fear, he was afterwards connected. Of course I got into trouble through my recommendation, and since that time I have dropped all acquaintance with Mr. Peter Black."

"I do not quite understand what you mean by shilling swindles," said Lord Kemms.

"You must have seen those advertisements to 'ladies of reduced incomes,' to 'persons in search of employment,' to 'persons of limited incomes,' how to 'secure a fortune,' 'for twelve postage-stamps a certain income may be secured!' To

that—to common trickery—Mr. Black descended ; but not alone, remember, my lord. He was connected with one of the cleverest and most plausible swindles that I can remember ever having been attempted on a small scale, and his partners in it were men in your own rank of life—noblemen and gentlemen—or, at least, honourables and baronets. These highly-principled individuals were not above taking the money of foolish women and inexperienced men ; they sold their names, and, when written to on the subject, said they believed the secretary to be a man of the highest standing and principle.

“Doubtless they were but the black sheep of your order ; but, when there are black sheep in that order, it behoves you, and such as you, my lord, to be careful.”

“What was this swindle ?” asked the owner of Kemms Park.

“It was one in which all the tickets sold were to draw prizes,” was the reply ; “in which shares were regularly issued, and prospectuses carefully drawn up and freely forwarded ; in which samples of goods were sent to agents on deposit of two pounds ; in which the hopes of fortune held out were so great,

that money poured in from the provinces like water, and would have continued to pour in but for a smashing article on the subject, which appeared in a respectable journal. That proved a death-blow to the scheme, and the reputable little lot had to close their concern, and adopt some other means of subsistence. What the others did I am unable to say: one appeared in the Bankruptcy Court, but that was some time afterwards.

“To Mr. Peter Black, however, ‘Limited Liability,’ in which the concern I have mentioned was his first venture, appeared in the very nick of time.

“He had tried his hand at most other trades; why not at the promotion of large companies?

“The shilling swindles, the wonderful City fraud, were but introductions to this mightier arena, and the first time, after years, when I met Mr. Black again, was when I saw him in splendid offices in Cannon Street, sipping Madeira, and issuing his orders as though poverty and he had never been even on speaking terms. I am not easily surprised, but I confess those offices and Mr. Peter Black himself astonished me.

“There was not a thing under heaven in those days

that could not be formed into a company, and accordingly Mr. Black was secretary to a Limited Liability for supplying England and the world with hermetically-sealed soups made from the flesh of South American oxen."

Here Lord Kemms laughed outright.

"There was nothing impossible about the matter," said Mr. Raidsford, quietly. "I'll be bound, if any man liked to go in single-handed for a project of the kind to-morrow, he could compass it—ay, and make money out of it too; but what a man may do, a company cannot do, and accordingly the soup never came from South America, and the bullocks Mr. Black represented in his reports as slain and in the English market may, for aught I know, be still roaming over the prairies."

"And after that company collapsed?" inquired his lordship.

"Why, since that, Mr. Black has been sometimes up and sometimes down—sometimes living in retirement with his banking account drawn down to two and three half-pence; and again, giving grand dinners and living utterly regardless of expense. He is in the latter state at present—has a house in Stanley

Crescent, servants in livery ; dinners from Gunter's ; Mrs. Black "receives" on Tuesdays ; Mr. Black asks great people to dinner any day in the week that suits his purpose. He has three separate banking accounts—he is promoting four different companies ; he has offices in Cannon Street, Broad Street, and George Street, Westminster. He has an efficient staff of clerks—he has got, it is said, a couple of first-rate backers ; he has all his past experience to guide him safely through the quagmires of limited liability ; and, in short, if Mr. Black do not now make his fortune, he never will. My own opinion is, he never will ; but that, of necessity, is merely an opinion."

"And suppose Squire Dudley embark with him ?" asked Lord Kemms.

"Squire Dudley will never come back to land," was the significant reply ; after which the pair rode on in silence.

At Mr. Raidsford's gates they parted company.

"I shall see you again this evening, you know," said my lord, waving his hand as he struck his horse's flank and galloped off.

Mr. Raidsford looked after the retreating figure

of his companion for a minute before entering his own gates, then he passed into his domain and rode slowly up the avenue, thinking as he rode.

“I wonder how he will decide?” was the burden of his mental discourse; “but I shall learn this evening.”

Now the reason he said so was, that Lord Kemms had promised to come over and dine with him *tête-à-tête*—the ladies of Mr. Raidsford’s family being absent.

CHAPTER X.

MR. BLACK GAINS HIS POINT.

WITHOUT in the least intending to do so, Lord Kemms had put a trump card into Mr. Black's hand —*the* trump card, in fact, which enabled him to win his little game; and the way this undesirable result came about was as follows:

For days, Mr. Black had been dangling the speculative coral and bells before Squire Dudley's eyes, amusing and interesting that grown-up child thereby. For days, the man who knew London off by heart, every turn in its dirty streets, every trick and move the dwellers in that great Babylon were up to, had been leading on towards the point he desired to reach, viz., that of enlisting Arthur in his company, of bribing him with his delusive shilling to serve the great King Mammon for ever and for aye!

To do Mr. Black justice, however, he had not the slightest idea of ruining his kinsman.

That blood is thicker than water, even though the blood be only consanguineous by reason of many and far-out marriages, was a creed of the promoter's—the only one he held, so far as I know, and for this reason he would not have drawn Arthur into anything doubtful; doubtful, that is, as he understood the meaning of the word.

Decidedly not; he wanted to help himself on in the world, and, if Arthur would only aid him with money, Squire Dudley too.

In the distance, Mr. Black prophetically beheld Arthur rich, happy, prosperous. He saw him, not a tiller of the ground, but a coiner of gold. If Mr. Black believed implicitly in anything excepting himself, it was in the vast capabilities of the PROTECTOR BREAD AND FLOUR COMPANY, LIMITED.

It was his ship; let him but once launch the scheme and the world should see. It should plough the ocean and bring back cargoes of gold; it should place Mr. Black beyond the frowns of fortune; it should make a man of Arthur Dudley; it should place him in that pecuniary harbour where the world's

storms are unheeded, in which to the gallant vessel, riding safely at anchor, the waves of the great sea signify as little as ripples on the stream.

What Mr. Black had always wanted was, according to his own statement, capital—given to him at any stage of his career (depending somewhat, however, on the stage he had reached), one hundred, five hundred, one thousand pounds, and Mr. Black saw his way clear to fortune.

All his life he had been racing after this phantom, which as constantly eluded his grasp, for what seemed capital to him one day was not capital the next. Suppose, for instance, this week one hundred pounds bounded the horizon of his desires, next week he discovered two were needed to accomplish his object. Truth was, his appetite grew by what it fed on, and the meal which one day he fancied would prove a feast, he turned from the following, as unfit to satisfy even a beggar.

To have heard Mr. Black discourse about a residence, for instance, concerning the accommodation he considered necessary, the worldly position he regarded as essential to happiness, the servants such an establishment required, no one would have

imagined he had ever been reduced to lodgings in Hoxton, where he was served by the dirtiest of slipshod maids, and had his beer—when he could pay for it—from “round the corner.”

Living in Stanley Crescent, which would once have seemed a flight too great for even his imagination to achieve, within a stone’s throw of Hyde Park, with his rooms upholstered in velvet and satin, with curtains such as the imagination of Mr. Peter Black had never previously conceived could be manufactured, with carpets such as the feet of Mr. Black had never before trodden upon, surrounded by mirrors and gilding, by pictures and statuettes, waited upon by silent human automatons, his wants almost anticipated, his orders obeyed to the letter, his commands remembered, his word law, the promoter’s fancy ‘pourtrayed for him yet greater things to come. Even in the matter of personal gratification it would seem that there is such a thing necessary as education—the education of what to desire; and this instruction Mr. Black’s youth had lacked; consequently, as the sailor’s desires were for “an ocean of rum,” and then “as much tobacco as he could chew,” and then “more rum,” so Mr.

Black's ignorant soul craved only for more luxury, a larger house, and a still better situation; more rooms to be upholstered in a still more magnificent style; costlier pictures, older china, softer carpets; a larger number of servants, equipages in which to drive round the Park; and money, money, money with which to keep up the show, and maintain still grander appearances.

A change that, from the retirement of Whitecross Street; from the shabby bed-room with use of sitting-room in Hoxton; from even more wretched lodgings into which he had been glad to creep at so much a night! In those weary days he envied Johnson driving the stout wife of his bosom out in the cart which, on week-days, delivered shoulders of mutton and sirloins of beef at the house of the said Johnson's customers; he grudged the good fortune of every man he saw with a decent coat on his back. He would gladly have changed places with young Tomkins, who could afford apple tart and Stilton cheese after his steak in a quiet eating-house situate in Pope's Head Alley. When a man, seated opposite to him in an omnibus, pulled out a handful of silver in order to look through it

for a fourpenny or threepenny piece, Mr. Black felt that individual had wronged him.

After all, it was natural enough. When the starved ragged little beggar who has stood with his nose flattened against the pastrycook's window, sees Master Tommy come forth, crammed to repletion with tarts and cheesecakes, his pockets full of sweets, and his hands of suggestive paper parcels, do you think the dirty, hungry imp likes the over-fed child, and never grudges him the contents of every one of those tempting paper bags?

And it is precisely the same with adults. The man, lacking even dry bread, cannot be supposed to gaze with unenvying idolatry at the man who has his six or eight courses for dinner ; and, therefore, and for all these reasons, there had been a time when Mr. Black regarded the man who could pay his way with a pardonable feeling of antagonism.

But all that was changed. On Mr. Johnson and his kind, on the poor creatures who were content to drone away at the business task, Mr. Black looked with ill-concealed contempt.

That any man should walk while others drove in their carriages—walk without lifting a hand to

better themselves—filled the promoter's mind with profound astonishment. Of necessity he knew there must be rich and poor; labourers and employers; workers and idlers; but that any person should be poor, and not cry aloud; that any human being should labour, and be satisfied; that any person should work, and accept such work as his portion thankfully, was a step beyond Mr. Black's philosophy.

Not to comprehend such a state of mental obtuseness had his talents been given to him, but rather that he might raise himself to a prominent position, where it would be possible for him to stand in a public place, high above his fellows, and thank God that he was not as other [men; but, rather, Peter Black, Esquire, worth hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pounds.

And very earnestly Mr. Peter Black believed he was at last on the high road to fortune. If he broke down by the way, he knew it would be for want of capital—not for lack of geographical information.

Unfortunately when, in a moment of sudden inspiration, he struck out the idea of "The Protec-

tor Bread and Flour Company!" he was up to the neck in three other companies, which were but as dross beside this mine of virgin gold.

"And it is a good thing, Dudley. By Jove, if old Stewart knew how hard I was pressed, he'd take it up himself, and cut me out of it, and make his fortune over again, the miserly old scamp! I'm in two minds to take the whole scheme to Runcorn, the advertising agent, and sell it to him—but there! I'll pull it through somehow. I'll find somebody to advance the needful, though this is the very worst time of the year for raising the wind." Which was a perfectly true statement, it may here be remarked; though Arthur Dudley, not being a commercial man, could scarcely be expected to know how true.

"It is the best thing I ever had to do with," went on Mr. Black, "and I have done some tidy little strokes of business in my time. Why, it is only nine months since I netted five hundred in one day, without spending a farthing, either, beyond fifty pounds deposit. There was a business for sale in the City, old established; man's health was bad; wife had grown genteel, perhaps; daughters were settled; sons in professions; good business, but

latterly neglected ; heard of it by chance—bought it, and paid a deposit. Mentioned it casually to Venney, whose fingers were itching for something of the sort. Venney went straight away to Paul, the member of Parliament who does in those kind of affairs, you know. Paul looked over his names, and, seeing he could form a company, sent Venney back to me with the cheque for five hundred pounds for my bargain. What do you think of that? and yet, if I had only held on for another fortnight, I might have doubled the five hundred. It is better than farming, that, is not it, Squire? You might plough up a good many acres of land before you would come on a find like that.”

“Ah! London is the place,” sighed Arthur Dudley.

“To be sure it is, for man, woman, and child,” replied Mr. Black. “It is the place to make money, and to spend it when you have made it. What good has a man of his life who resides continually in the country? I often wonder, Dudley, you don’t come up to town for a few months in every year.”

“Where should I get the money, Mr. Black, to do so?” questioned the younger man. “As you

justly remarked, a few minutes since, my land is not rich enough to grow five-hundred pound Bank of England notes."

"Good that — devilish good," chuckled Mr. Black.

"It is easy for a man like you to talk," went on Arthur, pleased with this flattering acknowledgment of his wit, "for a man with lots of money ——"

"My dear fellow, that is the very thing I stand in need of at this moment," interrupted Mr. Black.

"Well, with money's worth, then," continued Arthur. But Mr. Black cut across his sentence again.

"Not with more money's worth than you have, Squire. If I had your property, it would not be long before I began to dig nuggets out of it. If I had your stock, I would make five hundred pounds a-piece out of every head of cattle on your land. If I were a man of substance like you, I would never spend my life dragging after a lot of stupid yokels. I might keep my farm, but it would be for pleasure, for turning myself out to grass on, so to speak, after the fatigue of a London season. Be hanged if I would go on year after year seeing money made without having a try at the cards myself."

"It is all very well for men who have been brought up to it," remarked Arthur.

"Brought up to it! What do you mean?" asked Mr. Black. "Do you think I was brought up to all the trades I have made money by? What do you think I started in the world with? A plain commercial education, a mother and a lame sister to keep, and twenty pounds. I never served my time; I never had the chance of learning a business like Raidsford; I was always dragged back by having those two poor useless women to keep; and yet, still, see what I have done!"

"But you began early?" suggested Arthur.

"If I had not begun early, I should have begun late," was the reply.

"And then I am tied to this place."

"No, you are not," was the reply. "But you are like all men possessed of a small income—afraid of losing it. A man who begins with nothing has a far better chance of success than his neighbour, who starts on five or six hundred."

"Besides, I ought to have begun long ago," persisted Arthur.

"Better late than never," quoted Mr. Black. "I

tell you what it is now, Dudley, as long as we have got on this subject, let us talk about it. You want to make money, don't you?"

"The question is scarcely necessary," answered Squire Dudley, with a faint smile. "Do you chance to know any man who does not?"

"Yes," was the ready reply. "I know several who think themselves so deucedly safe, and comfortable, and secure, and all the rest of it, that they would not take a share in Rothschild's, if it were offered to them for an old song. There is your friend Raidsford, for instance."

"Oh! he's no friend of mine," corrected Arthur.

"Well, he is a case in point, at any rate. Lord Kemms does not consider our new company beneath his consideration, at any rate, and what is worth his attention ought not to be below that of a two-penny-halfpenny contractor, though that contractor may think there is nobody like Compton Raidsford, Esquire, in the world."

"You do not mean to say there is a likelihood of Lord Kemms going into your company?" said Arthur, eagerly.

"A likelihood? there is a certainty," was the

reply. "I have set my heart on getting him, and I will get him, no matter what it costs me to do so. But if I were to go to Compton Raidsford——"

"You will not go, though," interrupted Squire Dudley.

"Trust me," answered the promoter. "I was only instancing him as one of the men who do not want to make money. He is so puffed up with his park, and his deer, and his carriages, and his riding horses, and the infernal fuss that is made about him, it would be, 'No, thank you, Mr. Black. I have one business, and that is enough for me. I find it as much as I can manage. *Good morning!*' But you are differently situated, Dudley. You, like Lord Kemms, could do with a larger balance at your banker's."

"You amaze me about Lord Kemms," said Arthur, thoughtfully.

"And I believe I should amaze you still more if I showed you the list of names I expect to get on the Direction. Allan Stewart will bring them up like a huntsman the hounds; but he cost me dear. Would you believe I had to give him five hundred pounds in hard cash—not bills, mind you—before he would even listen to me?"

"Dear me! I should not have supposed any man's name was worth so much," observed the Squire.

"Worth it! he could be worth five thousand, if one only had had the money to give him, but just now I found even the five hundred a pull. You know he stands between the nobility and the commercial men. He is good to bring both, and he promises me to get his nephew."

"You don't mean Aymescourt?"

"Yes, Aymescourt, only his name is Croft now, you know; he came into such a switching property when old Croft died. Of course I am telling you all this in strict confidence, Dudley. Not a soul knows about these things except yourself."

"Of course," Arthur agreed. Believing implicitly in Mr. Black's statement, he felt flattered accordingly.

"By Jove," proceeded Mr. Black, invoking his favourite god, "won't some of the City people stare when they see our prospectus in the *Times*? Won't some of them wish they had thought of such a scheme! Rather," finished Mr. Black with a chuckle, "ra—a—ther." And Mr. Black took off his hat and wiped his forehead, and the pair had another turn on the grass under the trees in silence.

“I only wish,” began Mr. Black again, “I could begin advertising, for the great thing in all such matters is to make hay while the sun shines—a leaf out of your book, Dudley; but, till some of my other small fish are fried, I don’t see my way, unless I go to Runcorn, and then he gets the flesh, and leaves the bones to me. It is that advertising! it is the devil, it is cash on the nail—money down, or else no advertisement appears; and, good gracious! think of how a few quarter-column advertisements in the *Times* run up; why, it is like printing in gold.”

Still Arthur made no comment.

“Offices, furniture, printing, even clerks, can be got on credit,” continued Mr. Black, after allowing Arthur full time for the observation he did not make; “and credit gives one time to turn round and get the shares in, but the expense of advertising has nipped many a promising scheme in the bud. Does not somebody say something about there being a tide in the affairs of men? I am not a very good hand at remembering any quotation except prices,” added Mr. Black, with the laugh which had excited Lally’s uncomplimentary comparison; “but I dare say you do, and I know there is a tide in my affairs

now, which would float my ship, if I could only take advantage of it. However, I'll go back to town on Monday and see what can be done."

"How much money do you want?" asked Arthur; perhaps he was thinking, too, that a tide had come in his affairs, across which he might be able to steer his course to fortune.

"How much? Oh! I am sure I could not say," was the reply. "In some cases ready money goes so far, can be so well worked, that I might, perhaps, be able to do with very little. If I went to a capitalist, of course I should ask him for a good round sum; but if I can find a friend, I shall only just borrow enough to keep me going from hand to mouth. In any event I must make it worth *somebody's* while to help me; but I don't mind that, if I am only left what I consider a fair share of the profit."

"What do you call a fair share?"

"Well, that depends. I should not mind giving any one a third who helped me through the matter. Nor even a half, if the help were really serviceable; but I should object to taking a tenth, or anything of that kind, after all the worry I have had in the affair."

“Do you know any one who you think would go into it with you on what you consider equal terms?” was the Squire’s next question.

“He’s nibbling,” thought Mr. Black ; so he let the line float loose for a moment, while he answered, “Yes, I think I do ; that man I spoke of just now, Vanney, would, if he is in London, but I am afraid he is off to Scotland, and won’t be back for some weeks ; that is the way just at this time of the year, everybody is off, or starting off. Certainly I might go to Scotland after him.”

“I wish I had ready money,” said Arthur ; “I should not mind risking a little on it myself.”

“Oh yes, you would,” answered Mr. Black ; “if you had been inclined for any mischief of that kind, you would not have kept your hands out of it so long.”

“How the deuce is a man to mix up in anything of the kind, if opportunity never offer?” Arthur demanded.

“But opportunity does offer ; opportunities are always lying under people’s feet, only some are too proud, or too cautious, or too lazy, to stoop and pick them up. No, no, Squire, you had better stick to

your farming ; you must be making a lot of money here, and your wife would not like you to go into business."

"My wife would wish me to do whatever was best for all our interests," said Arthur, sharply.

"Perhaps so ; but, if she would, she differs wonderfully from mine," was the reply, "Lord knows I have often been thankful I never cared twopence about her, or she would have kept me a go-by-the-ground all my life. When a man is fond of his wife, naturally he does not like to cross her. I can quite understand what has kept you back, Dudley ; you ought, as Mrs. Ormson says, to have married a rich wife, and then you could have afforded to humour her."

"No man ever had a better wife than I have, Mr. Black."

"Is not that what I have just said ? and naturally she influences you. I think it is a pity, you know, because women do not know what is best either for their husbands or themselves ; but it is very greatly to your credit. I dare say, if I had married differently, I should feel like you. After looking at Mrs. Dudley, I think what a pity

it is to see her wasting her life at Berrie Down. By Jove! if I had a wife like her, it would be worth a thousand a year to me. Don't she set off the head of a man's table! Wouldn't she be the one to entertain the great people I want to make useful! And your sisters, Dudley. It's a sin to see them buried here—girls who might marry well to-morrow. Mrs. Ormson and I often talk it over; but we have agreed it is of no use fretting about the business, which is just one of those matters we were not sent into the world to right."

In which last portion of his sentence, had Mr. Black omitted the "not," he would much more truthfully have stated his own and Mrs. Ormson's opinions. At all events, if the pair had not sufficient reliance on Providence to believe they were sent to right the matter, they thought they ought to have been, and were not slow about asserting their conviction, which comes to nearly the same thing.

"Supposing your scheme turned out well, how soon should you expect to make money by it?" inquired Arthur, apparently a little irrelevantly.

"How soon? Oh! within a twelvemonth. I shall have my shares, of course—paid-up shares,

mind you—and I shall have my profit on the sale of the mills and plant. I don't take all that trouble and risk for nothing ; and then there will be various pickings. Altogether, to begin with, I shall not clear less than ten thousand pounds, and then my shares ought to be worth twenty thousand pounds more, at least."

"And how much of that would you give to a person who saw you through your present difficulty?" asked Arthur, desperately.

"If *you* saw me through, one-half," was the quick reply. "Look here, Dudley," went on the promoter, "if you are thinking of joining me, make up your mind at once, and let us talk the matter over. This is Saturday. I must do something in it on Monday. Don't beat about the bush, man. If you want information, I will give it to you ; if you wish to make a push for fortune, don't be backward about saying so ; if you fancy this venture might suit you, inquire into it fully. If you don't like it after inquiring, why, there is no harm done. I could not ask you to go into it as I might a commercial man—being a relation and so forth naturally ties my tongue—only I will say this much, it is the best

thing I have ever had to do with, and there is no reason I can see why you should not make your fortune out of it too. Keep the money in the family, eh, Squire?" and Mr. Black looked sharply at Arthur from under his eyelids—looked round at him without moving his head to see how his companion was taking it.

Squire Dudley's flood was at its tide then, he fancied; and yet he felt nervous about launching his boat upon it. He was longing to make money, hungering and thirsting for a chance of bettering his position, and yet he stood irresolute waiting for some chance to decide his purpose, for some hand beside his own to unloose his barque, and set it floating over the waves of success, to the shores of fortune.

"How much money would be sufficient in the first instance?" he inquired for the second time during that interview.

"Oh! a hundred would start the advertising," said Mr. Black; "that hundred would bring in some of the shares; but between you and me, Dudley, what with clerks and one devilment and another in the other companies, even a hundred pounds is a

sum I could not at the instant command. I had to pay, as I tell you, five hundred cash to Stewart, and a similar sum to Crossenham. Well, you know, a few hundreds here and a few hundreds there make a hole in a man's banking account, if he be not as rich as Miss Coutts. Then I have given a lot of bills falling due at different dates for Crossenham's lease; and, although I think my other ventures may give me money enough to meet those before they are presented, still I must be prepared for the worst. Altogether—but who are those riding up the lane? Raidsford and Lord Kemms, as I live! Raidsford, no doubt, trying to put my lord against the company. Ah! it is no use, my boy; you won't checkmate me so easily as all that comes to. Now, what the deuce is his lordship coming to say?" and then ensued the interview at which the reader has already been present.

"I am in with you now, Black," said Arthur Dudley, when, their talk finished, they retraced their steps towards the house.

"Only so far as Nellie goes," answered Mr. Black, reassuringly; "even that shall be but a loan, if you like;" but Mr. Black knew better than this.

He knew Arthur had, as he mentally phrased it, "tasted blood," and that, having done so, he would never recede from the undertaking to which he had put his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

NELLIE.

It was after dinner in Mr. Compton Raidsford's house. Host and guest had finished their wine, and sat with coffee before them, silent.

Lord Kemms was thinking about Mr. Black and that gentleman's proposals; Mr. Compton Raidsford was thinking, not merely about Mr. Black, but also about Lord Kemms, and wondering how that nobleman would decide.

If there were one thing the owner of Moorlands conceived ought to be put down with a strong hand and a stretched-out arm, that thing was bubble companies.

Even legitimate companies he disliked and distrusted.

A self-made man, he naturally regarded with

suspicion the growth of any commercial system likely to render success dependent more upon capital than individual ability and exertion.

A business man, who had for his order much the same *esprit de corps* as an artist or a poet may be supposed to possess, he noted jealously the increasing tendency of the age to keep small capitalists or non-capitalists in the position of clerks and managers, to concentrate all manufactures in a few hands, and sweep modest master tradesmen off the face of the earth ; to do away, in fact, with a business middle class at all, and to reduce the whole system to that of millionaire and servant.

A thoughtful man, he foresaw that if the great incentive to labour, the prospect of independence, were withdrawn, the employed classes would soon become mere eye-servants, that it would be difficult to procure thoroughly trustworthy clerks and efficient managers.

Right well he knew that the best servant is he who hopes some day to become a master, that the man who obeys orders most implicitly is he who expects at a future period to have to give orders.

High wages and large salaries might be all very

well ; but Mr. Raidsford declared no salary which a company was justified in giving could compensate a man for the prospect of being some day on his "own account."

"These companies will ruin our legitimate commerce, lead to jobbery of all sorts, and utterly ruin our working men. I consider limited liability, which is, after all, only the climax of concentration of capital, the greatest curse that ever fell upon England. It is all very well to talk of the rate of discount acting as a beneficial check. The rate of discount which only winds up a few companies, simply means ruin to hundreds and thousands of small traders. In fact, in these days, I do not see how, unless a man have a large capital or be a swindler, he is to get on at all."

Holding these cheerful views, even concerning legitimate companies, it may readily be imagined how sternly Mr. Raidsford set his face against all ventures which would not, to use his own word, "wash;" how thoroughly he detested the whole system of "getting up" a board ; with what rancour he would have pursued "promoters," even through the purgatory of Basinghall Street.

As for lords and honourables, for generals and colonels, for baronets and "swells" of all kinds, Mr. Raidsford would have had them keep to their own rank and their own pursuits exclusively. That, individually and collectively, they despised business—honest work, he called it—the self-made man believed, and for this belief he had perhaps sufficient grounds.

If they despised it, why did they meddle with it? Could not they keep to their end of the town, and cease troubling the City, which they scoffed at with their presence? Not so did their forefathers. This was a good peg for Mr. Raidsford to hang a host of disparaging remarks upon! The men who were first of their name, who left titles to be borne by their descendants, and money to support those titles, worked in the City, lived in it, would have thought shame to sell their honest names in order to lead honest men and women into trouble. If the aristocracy wanted some of the City gold, let them come and help coin it first.

Such and much more was the burden of Mr. Raidsford's song, and it was pleasant to hear him going through that recitative with bold sonorous

voice to lord or lady, to capitalist or adventurer, whenever chance offered. Pleasant to hear him, a successful man, speak thus in the home his industry and his abilities had won for him, while he was still, not young, it is true, but yet sufficiently far removed from old age to hope for many years in which to enjoy his good fortune.

His ideas might not be correct. How far they were so, only another generation can tell; but they were his own earnest convictions, and he did not hesitate to express them openly.

"If I had to begin my life again now," he said, "I could never hope to accomplish what I have done." And seeing what he had done, caused his opinions to carry much weight to the men and women he frequently addressed.

Success has a wonderfully convincing power of argument, and it would have been hard for any one to look at Moorlands, and not believe (knowing his history) that its owner had a right to speak with authority.

Mr. Raidsford perhaps might be aware of this fact, for he was never so eloquent on the subject of private enterprise as in his own London office,

which commanded a view of his extensive premises filled with busy workmen, or down in Hertfordshire, where everybody was well aware how he had earned enough to buy it all "his-self."

To the poorest labourer, Compton Raidsford was a standing miracle ; from Lord Kemms downward every person in the community marvelled at his success.

The bran new palace to which Arthur Dudley took such grievous exception, was a matter of necessity rather than choice. If Mr. Raidsford could have purchased Berrie Down Hollow, Moorlands House would never have been erected. As it was, the rich man had found it impossible, with all his wealth, to purchase an old residence in the situation he desired. As a rule, people who have desirable properties like to keep them. Once in a dozen years or so, there is "just the place" a man wants put up for sale ; but so surely as this happens, that man has not the means to make it his own.

What you like in every respect is difficult to meet with, residentially as well as matrimonially, for which sufficient reason Mr. Raidsford bought Moorlands without a house, and built the edifice that affronted Arthur Dudley, on it.

Before the great building (like a factory, the Squire said) was thought of, Moorlands had been a picturesque stretch of poor ground, pleasant for strolling in the summer's evenings, pleasant for picnics, pleasant to ride across, without leave asked or granted.

It was bare, meagre land, which had not been turned up for years and years, the grass of which was nibbled close down by the sheep that could scarcely get a scanty living off it. There the daisies grew in the summer-time, there the children could gather enough to make chains for a whole village, there in the low parts the rushes sprang likewise in sufficient quantities to provide butterfly cages, swords, helmets, and umbrellas for the juvenile population of North Kemms and its vicinity. There was a wood where nuts grew abundantly, a little coppice wood on the side of a sloping hill, at the base of which the Kemm flowed on its way rejoicingly. In the Kemm were silver-backed trout and tench and perch. Many a time Arthur had angled in it, and there was a pleasant old lane, wide and grassy, almost like a forest glade, bordered by fine old timber, and entered by a gate swinging on one

hinge, which led away not merely to the coppice, but to a little piece of rising ground where tradition said there had once been a mansion belonging to a certain wicked Sir Giles, whose heirs were now in foreign parts, and whose bones had been mouldering for a hundred years or more in the vaults underneath North Kemms church.

Certainly the lane led straight up to the hillock, on which some remains of walls, some traces of a former building, were to be found ; but there was nothing much to confirm the idea of a mansion ever having occupied the site, though the gossips affirmed Sir Giles' had once been a great house, which was razed to the ground on account of the wickedness enacted within it. Rather hard on the house, certainly, considering Sir Giles, the perpetrator of so much wickedness, lay in consecrated ground, snugly incased in lead and oak ; but none the less likely to be true on that account, perhaps.

A few rose-trees grew in what tradition said had once been Sir Giles' pleasure garden ; and there was a goodly bush of sweet briar, to say nothing of a few evergreens and flowers, such as London pride, Canterbury bells, Solomon's seal, double daisies, and

such like, scattered about in beds that had apparently been laid out in the Dutch style. But still there was no trace of winding walks, or sweeping drive, of yew hedges, courtyard or pleasure; nothing left to tell of a great man's residence ever having occupied the site where Mr. Raidsford's palace was afterwards erected.

Lord Kemms' idea of the matter was, perhaps, more correct than the popular one. He thought it most probable Sir Giles' house had been elsewhere, and this smaller abode but a mere country cottage, in which the baronet might have drunk, and gambled, and sinned, and fought, as was averred. It was known that this same wicked Sir Giles, the last baronet, had a fine mansion in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and there was a report of his having been possessed of some broad manors in the North; but the awful stories which were told of his wild life always had for their scene Moorlands, where there was scarcely one stone left upon another, where the daisies sprang and the rushes grew, where the nuts ripened on the hazel bushes, and the birds built in the hedgerows and laurels, spring after spring.

This place Mr. Raidsford saw, liked, purchased

cheap, and spoiled — so Arthur Dudley said. Perhaps the Squire was right. No doubt the grassy lane, with its gate hanging on one hinge, with the branches of its overhanging trees almost touching any pedestrian who passed beneath them, was more picturesque than Mr. Raidsford's gravelled drive and wide sweeping entrance, than the lodges, than all the new-cut stone and fresh mortar.

Doubtless, the daisies were more lovely to the eyes than fields of corn and mangold-wurzel. Without question, the spot where the rushes and the yellow lilies grew, did not gain anything in artistic effect when drain-tiles and labourers had done their work, and the place, "dry as a bone," produced crops of barley better than any Squire Dudley could show. It was not to be disputed that the scattered stones, the desolate flowers, the neglected garden, the tangled little corner of wilderness, were more suggestive than Mr. Raidsford's bran new mansion; nor that the wood had been more enjoyable in its former neglected condition than it seemed when paths were made through it, and a summer-house perched above the Kemm; but still, people must live somewhere, and the tents they dwell in must be new

at some time. Even Berrie Down Hollow had been built once ; it did not come into existence with the Creation—brambles had been cleared away for it, the turf had been turned up in the fields which were now Arthur's, the picturesque common had been divided into meadows and corn-fields, into pastures and arable land.

For all of which reasons, Squire Dudley should not have complained when the lane at Moorlands was metamorphosed into a drive ; when the ground which barely yielded pasturage for a few sheep, was ploughed and ploughed again, and finally laid down in grass for a deer park ; when wheat sprang up where the daisies had grown ; when a new house showed its face amongst the trees ; when gardens were laid out, and conservatories erected, and stables built, and employment given ; and a new neighbour, not such an one as the old wicked Sir Giles, who, it was stated, cared neither for God nor devil, came to dwell at Moorlands, which he had sense enough not to re-christen.

A different man from Mr. Dudley would have held out the right hand of fellowship to the stranger, walked over and called upon him, and been cordially

welcomed in return ; for if Arthur were poor, he was of gentle blood, and if Mr. Raidsford had risen, he was none the less, indeed perhaps all the more, friendly disposed towards one better born than himself ; but the Squire did nothing of the kind. Rather he stood on the lawn at Berrie Down and cursed his day, lamenting that Compton Raidsford—a mushroom, an upstart, a snob—should be so much, while he, Arthur Dudley, was nothing.

Had Arthur been possessed of ten thousand a year, he would never have said a word against Compton Raidsford, or the alterations at Moorlands ; he would have proffered him the hospitalities of Berrie Down, and shed the light of his countenance on the new comer ; but then, Arthur had not ten thousand a year, which made all the difference.

There are many children in the world, grown as well as little boys and girls, who, though willing enough to share a toy if it chance to belong to them, will yet refuse to play with a companion who owns the toy instead of them. They can be generous and patronizing ; but when the tables are reversed, they go into a corner and sulk.

That was precisely Arthur Dudley's case ; the

world's toys were in other hands, and he would neither look at nor use them. If he could not have them of his own, he would have none of them ; if he could not have silver dishes on his own table, he would not eat out of them at another man's.

A nice, amiable trait to have to record ; and yet many a very agreeable fellow, owner of all the pleasant things Fortune reserves for her especial favourites, might not be one whit more agreeable, or contented, or genial than Arthur Dudley, if luck took a notion some fine morning of leaving him out at elbows. Only people cannot exactly comprehend this truth ; and, as a consequence, Arthur's neighbours had long been sick of his airs and tempers, as they styled his resolution to keep himself to himself. Lord Kemms, for instance, would once have been glad enough to see him at the Park ; but Arthur rejected all that nobleman's well-intended civilities ; and thus, as the years went by, the Squire was reduced to that most uncomfortable of all positions, viz., having a mere speaking acquaintance with his neighbours, whom he could not avoid meeting occasionally, and who really came in time to feel, as Compton Raidsford said, " out of patience with the fellow."

And yet, looking at Berrie Down, which stood on its sunny hill, smilingly nestling amid trees and plantations with rich green pastures intervening between it and Moorlands, both Lord Kemms and Mr. Raidsford were thinking pityingly of the owner, and wishing Arthur had been like anybody else.

It was impossible for them to have talked about Mr. Black, and Mr. Black's scheme, without bringing Squire Dudley's name into the discussion also; indeed, Mr. Raidsford had instanced him as one of the men most likely to be led into trouble on the strength of Lord Kemms' name; "for, although he may be too proud to visit at Kemms Park, my lord," finished the owner of Moorlands, "he will not be too proud to follow your lead, if he believe you are taking the road to fortune."

After which followed a pause, a thoughtful pause, that lasted long enough to give Lord Kemms ample leisure to frame his ideas into some sort of definite shape, if they ever were to be got into shape at all. And yet when he broke silence, it was not directly of Mr. Black's scheme he spoke.

"I cannot help thinking," he said, "about Dudley's manner when he sold that mare to me to-day.

I never saw him resemble a human being so much before. The way in which he put down Black was splendid; I could like the fellow, if he would get down off his stilts, and be a little natural."

"There is good in him, I believe," was Mr. Raidsford's reply; "and as for his wife, she is charming; I hope he won't bring her and the little ones to grief. Have you ever seen his eldest child—the girl, I mean?"

"Yes;—will make a pretty woman, like her mother. A strange child; not in the least shy," added his lordship, with a smile.

He was thinking of one day in the early summer, when he had overtaken Heather and Lally in Berrie Down Lane, and dismounting, lifted the little girl and placed her on the Black Knight's back, while he walked beside, talking to Mrs. Dudley. Which proceeding had so much endeared him to Lally, that she was in the habit of talking about him as "her friend," and declaring he had "lovely hair, like Lally's own;" an observation which might not have proved flattering to Lord Kemms' vanity had he heard it.

"I wish to Heaven I saw my way clear:" it was

the owner of Kemms Park who uttered this by no means uncommon desire. "What shall I do, Raidsford, toss up which it is to be, or take your advice?"

"Your lordship must use your own judgment in the matter," was the reply.

"Now, that is what provokes me about people," remarked Lord Kemms, pettishly. "They say all manner of things to set one against a pet project, and then at the last moment declare a man must exercise his own judgment, as if he could do so under the circumstances. Don't you know, a man cannot judge his own case? Since you have been counsel and adviser, why should you object to decide the question? Here is the way it stands,—you say the project cannot succeed; my respectable kinsman, Allan Stewart, says it not only can but shall. You have convinced me Mr. Black is no more honest than he can afford to be, or rather, you have confirmed a suspicion I previously entertained to that effect; but then here is a good thing, about which it may pay him to be honest at last; and—and—to finish the matter, I had a fancy to go into this venture, since I have sworn never again to 'make a

book.' I think I'll toss up, Raidsford, or draw lots ; you shall hold them."

"No, my lord, I will not ; you ought not to let chance decide this question for you. It is one you ought to think out seriously, and——"

"Good heavens ! I have been thinking about it for a week past," interrupted Lord Kemms, pettishly.

"Then think of it for a week more ; and think at the same time betting on horses is an honest and respectable way of amusing yourself, in comparison with selling your name to companies. In the one case you only ruin yourself, in the latter——"

"Hold, my Mentor," once again interposed Lord Kemms, "we have gone over all that ground before ;" and he balanced his spoon on the top of his coffee cup, and thoughtfully contemplated this feat of skill as he spoke.

"So, though you have taken the responsibility of advising, you decline that of deciding," he went on. "Decide, and your words shall be to me as the laws of the Medes and Persians."

"If your lordship really wish me to do so," began Mr. Raidsford ;—but at this juncture Lord

Kemms pushed back his chair from the table, and walked over towards one of the windows.

“No, no,” he said ; “I won’t ask you to do that ; it would not be fair ; besides, I am old enough to make up my own mind, and bear the consequence of my own acts. I will not be one of Mr. Black’s decoy ducks, as you are kind enough to style his directors. I will write to him on Monday, and——”

“Mr. Alexander Dudley wishes to speak to your lordship,” said a servant, entering the room at this juncture.

“Wishes to speak to me?” repeated Lord Kemms ; “where is he ?”

“In the library, my lord ;” and forthwith “my lord ” walked across the hall into the room where Alick stood waiting for him.

The lad had not sat down. He stood beside the library table with his hat in his hand ; and even when Lord Kemms motioned him to a chair, he declined the proffered courtesy.

“My brother was to have sent you Nellie this evening, my lord,” he began. “I have been to the Park, but finding you were here, came on. I hope

you will excuse my doing so. I thought it was better for me to see you."

"Does your brother want to be off his bargain?" asked his lordship, sharply. "If that be what you have to say, of course I shall not hold him to it."

"That is not what I have to say," answered Alick, boldly. He had felt nervous and fluttered at first, but Lord Kemms' manner braced up his courage in an instant. He had felt a discrepancy between himself, his prospects, his dress, his position, and the grand house into which he had been permitted to enter, almost under protest (so it seemed to him), of a servant who evidently thought he had no business at Moorlands; but that was all now forgotten.

Lord Kemms had made a great mistake, and having made it, Alick could strike him under the fifth rib. His irritation had thrown him off his guard, and now Alick could deliver his message with effect.

"My brother sold Nellie to you, believing her to be sound. We are not quite certain that she is sound; and, not being certain, my lord, we would not send her to you."

For a moment Lord Kemms' face flushed scarlet ; then he said,—

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Dudley, for my hasty speech. The fact is—I—I—had set my heart on having her ; and—really this is most provoking—I wanted her so particularly.”

“And my brother wanted the money particularly, my lord,” answered the lad ; “at least, so he said,” added Alick, with a terrible remembrance of Arthur's wrath when he first heard there was anything amiss with Nellie.

“What the devil is wrong with her?” asked Lord Kemms, irritably. “Sit down, can't you, and tell me all about it.”

“I am afraid she has got something the matter with her sight,” was the reply. “When you first spoke to me on the subject, that day in the paddock, my lord,” added the lad, “I thought there was not a blemish about her, but this last week I have felt uneasy. Of course it is not easy to tell whether it is so or not ; only, having been with her all her life, I notice what another person might not. I did not want to vex my brother unless I felt certain, so he knew nothing about the matter till he told me she was to be sent over to the Park.”

“And then?” inquired Lord Kemms.

“Then I mentioned my fear to him, and he said you ought to be informed of it. We knew, my lord, or, at least, we thought, you would not have her examined by a veterinary surgeon, coming from us; indeed, I doubt if any stranger could detect a thing wrong about her *now*.”

“But you think there is?”

For a moment Alick remained silent; he felt the hundred pounds Arthur wanted so badly might be had, if he only appeared doubtful; and Arthur, he knew, was fuming and fretting at home over his disappointment. The youth loved his brother, and was grateful to him; further, he was afraid of his temper; but still, right was right, and honour honour.

“My lord, I know there is, though my brother does not believe it.”

“Still you might have passed her off as sound upon me, even subject to a veterinary opinion?”

“No, my lord; a jobber might, but *we* could not,” amended Alick, looking every inch a Dudley as he spoke.

“I stand corrected,” said Lord Kemms, with a

laugh. "I quite see ; the thing might be possible, but not to you. Now, what does your brother propose?"

"To consider the bargain off," was the prompt reply.

"Nothing else?" inquired his lordship.

"Or otherwise," answered Alick, "to let you have her, giving an undertaking that if within six months my idea prove to have been correct, he will take her back and return your money."

"Evidently he is not of your opinion?"

"No, my lord."

"Do you think you know more about horses than he?"

"I think I know more about Nellie."

For a moment Lord Kemms looked hard in Alick Dudley's face, which was frank, and young, and pleasant. He had not Arthur's delicately-cut features,—he was cast altogether in a larger and a rougher mould ; but he was the making of a finer man, the owner of Kemms Park decided. Looking at Alick's face, he saw reflected as in a mirror the scene which had taken place at Berrie Down, and, perhaps, it was this which made him say, suddenly,—

"Your brother was not very well pleased when

you expressed your opinion to him, I suppose—blamed you, probably?”

“When people are vexed, they usually blame the person nearest them at the time,” was Alick’s philosophic reply.

“You suspected nothing of this when I spoke to you in the paddock. If I had bought her then, that is, if your brother had taken my offer then, you could have sent her to me with a clear conscience.”

“Yes, my lord. There was certainly nothing wrong with her then; at least, nothing that I could see,” Alick answered.

“And there is nothing your brother can see the matter now?”

“Nothing.”

“Then I will take her,” said his lordship; and Alick breathed a sigh of intense relief.

“You shall have her the first thing on Monday morning,” he said, rising, “and the letter, too.”

“What letter?”

“My brother’s undertaking to return you the money, in case she prove unsound.”

“No, I won’t have it,” was the reply. “I’ll run the chance of her.”

"No, my lord, pray do not do that!" Alick entreated. "I am as sure as I can be of anything her sight is affected. If you will take her for the six months, and pay my brother for her now, as he really wants the money, I shall be very grateful; but I would rather repay you myself than think hereafter you had bought a useless animal from us."

"And pray, how the deuce should you propose to repay me yourself?" inquired Lord Kemms. But the words had scarcely passed his lips before he repented having uttered them.

"I hope not to remain a burden on my brother *all* my life," answered the lad in a low tone, with his cheeks aflame, but with eyes boldly looking his questioner in the face.

"My boy," said the nobleman, kindly laying his hand on Alick's shoulder, "that is three times in one interview you have rebuked me. I am sorry to have pained you, and I beg your pardon for my thoughtlessness. Tell your brother he could not have chosen a better messenger. I will take Nellie, and, when you have made your fortune, we can talk about repayment, if she turn out badly."

"Thank you, my lord." The boy's heart was very full, and he could not say another word.

Silently he moved towards the door, Lord Kemms following him.

"What are you going to be?" inquired the nobleman, as they stood together on the threshold.

"A merchant, if I am fortunate enough ever to rise higher than a clerk."

"Do you think you will like business better than farming?"

"I mean to try and like anything which offers me a chance of getting on in the world," was the reply.

"Then I hope you may get on, and that I shall some day see you rich and prosperous, a millionaire. It is possible; in this house, it is scarcely needful for me to tell you, all things are, humanly speaking, possible." And with that Lord Kemms held out his hand, which Alick could have kissed for very gratitude.

"I will call at Berrie Down on Monday," said his lordship, when Alick had passed through the open hall-door. Having announced which intention, he returned to the dining-room, where he reported the gist of the conversation to Mr. Raidsford.

"The greatest kindness you could have done Squire Dudley would have been to take him at his word," was Mr. Raidsford's practical comment on the affair.

"Perhaps so; but I could not afford to be less honest and honourable than they," Lord Kemms answered.

"Ay, that is the misery of it," said his host. "Honest and honourable falling among thieves!"

Some similar thought to this it had been, perhaps, which suggested to Lord Kemms the idea of calling at Berrie Down. Some vague fancy of saving Arthur—of rescuing him from the Philistines! But when once he found himself seated in Squire Dudley's drawing-room, he felt how futile was any such hope, how utterly vain it would be for him to proffer advice, or counsel caution to his neighbour.

Already the poison had begun to work; already he had dreamed his dreams, and beheld his visions; already he had made his thousands, and spent them in imagination; already the glory of the future flung a brightness across his path, and made him look on life more cheerfully, on his fellow-men more kindly.

Let success bring what it would, it could not bring more than Arthur already saw advancing towards him. Prophetically, out of the great City he beheld riches, and honours, and glories, travelling northward to Berrie Down. The dust of the approaching caravan was clear to his mental vision as the turf stretching down to the Hollow.

If for a moment he was taken aback, it was when Lord Kemms told Mr. Black, in his presence, he had decided to decline his obliging offer. But Mr. Black so coolly pooh-poohed what he called his lordship's hasty rejection,—so resolutely refused to take “no” for an answer,—so determinedly, and yet pleasantly, said they “could talk the matter over at some future time, there was no hurry about it,”—so utterly ignored the fact of Lord Kemms having assured him his mind was made up, he would have nothing whatever to do with the company,—that Arthur was reassured, and believed Mr. Black, when that gentleman subsequently informed him Lord Kemms had only been a little set against the affair by “that meddling upstart, Raidsford.”

“He'll be all right enough by the time we want him,” finished the promoter, confidently; while his

lordship was walking down the drive, feeling he had made nothing by his move, rather, on the contrary, given the advantage to a much cleverer and more ready man than himself.

“Hang the fellow!” he thought, “and his confounded self-sufficiency. Ah! my little friend,” he added out loud, as Lally parted the boughs of an evergreen oak, and looked out at him from among the greenery, “won’t you come and speak to me; won’t you tell me how you have been this long time?”

Not from any shyness, but from precisely the same feeling as that which makes a kitten bound off when a hand is stretched out coaxingly towards it, Lally allowed the branches to spring back and the foliage hide her.

“Don’t be rude, Lally; go and speak to Lord Kemms when he asks you,” said a voice from behind the shrubs, while two very white hands parted the branches above Lally’s head, while a very pretty face, half concealed by leaves, met the nobleman’s delighted eyes.

In a moment a sweet jingle of verse seemed ringing through the air.

That pleasant and goodly thing, a woman's beauty—ever old, yet ever new—old as the world, yet new as the dawning day—chased all disagreeable thoughts out of Lord Kemms' mind, while Dr. Mackay's lines took their place :—

“ And now and then I'll see thy face,
Mid boughs and branches peeping.”

He had never known how beautiful a woman's face could look till he beheld Bessie's through that tracery of leaf, and twig, and stem.

More than ever now he desired to renew his acquaintance with Lally, who came forth from her hiding-place, and, in reply to his tender inquiries, informed him she was quite well,—that mamma was quite well ; after which conversational effort, Lally—a surprised mass of muslin, hair, and freckles—stood, her lap full of flowers, looking at Lord Kemms.

“ What lovely flowers !” he said.

“ Bessie's !” explained Lally, nodding in the direction of the pretty face, the owner of which now, with the assistance of Lord Kemms, emerged from amid the hedge of evergreens, and stood before his lordship, laughing and blushing, a vision of loveliness worth contemplating.

“We were gathering flowers,” she said, in elucidation of Lally’s statement.

“A very appropriate occupation,” remarked his lordship, gallantly.

He would have liked nothing better than ten minutes’ conversation with this young lady, who had appeared so unexpectedly before him; but Miss Ormson was not inclined to gratify this innocent desire, and made her disinclination so prettily apparent, that his lordship had no resource left but to bid Lally farewell, which he did most affectionately.

“Good-bye, dear.”

“Dood-bye!” and Lally confided to him one of her little brown hands.

“Will you give me a kiss?”

“Iss;” and Lally made up her mouth, and went through the ceremony with laudable readiness and composure.

“Remember, you promised to marry me. I’m to wait for you, you know.”

“Iss.” Lally was perfectly agreeable.

“You will not promise so readily fifteen years hence, little one,” he said; but this being a step

beyond Lally's understanding, she kept silence with a wisdom which might not have belonged to her fifteen years hence, either.

And, indeed, no answer was required from her, Bessie and Lord Kemms having settled the matter with a mutual smile, after which, as the leave-taking had been already unduly prolonged, the visitor lifted his hat in adieu to Bessie, and departed.

"Why didn't he tiss 'oo?" Lally inquired, quite loud enough for Lord Kemms to hear.

"You naughty child!" exclaimed Bessie; "hush! hush! hush!" and then the pair broke their way through the evergreen hedge again, and returned, ostensibly, to their former employment of gathering flowers.

But, in reality, both Lally and her companion were looking after Lord Kemms' retreating figure. From the grass-plot where they stood, a glimpse was to be obtained at intervals of the road, and at last Bessie relinquished her sham occupation, and stood gazing, with a sad, sad look in her face, after the owner of Kemms Park.

All at once the object of so much attention turned round, and caught her in the very act

Bessie never professed to be more than human, and accordingly she said to Lally, angrily—

“How can you be so bold, child, as to stare after gentlemen like that?”

“’Oo ’taring too!” retorted Lally, indignantly; and, as she could not deny the truth of this statement, Bessie covered her confusion by a vigorous onslaught among the flowers.

After a few seconds, however, she lifted her head again, and looked along the road once more, and as she looked she sighed; but that sigh was not breathed for the nobleman whose hair was like “Lally’s own!”

CHAPTER XII.

LIFE AT THE HOLLOW.

ALTHOUGH, in the course of his conversation with Arthur Dudley, Mr. Black had intimated his intention of running up to town on the Monday following, and probably remaining there, he did not carry that desirable project into practice, but rather announced his intention of favouring Hertfordshire with his presence for some time longer.

“That is to say, if Mrs. Dudley be not quite weary of us,” he added ; which, of course, left Heather no resource but to entreat a prolongation of Mr. and Mrs. Black’s stay, which she did so kindly, that Mr. Black thanked her for her invitation.

“Just as if you had given her a chance of not inviting you,” remarked Miss Hope, with a sneer.

“True ; I forgot I was not speaking to Miss

Hope, whose frankness is notorious," retorted Mr. Black ; having given the lady which tit, for her tat, he strolled out, in excellent temper, on to the lawn.

Spite of his dislike to the country—a dislike that was, perhaps, as genuine as anything about him (his vanity and selfishness excepted), he liked Berrie Down Hollow. It was an establishment which, notwithstanding some blemishes, in most respects met his views.

On an income of a few hundreds a year, which had to be dragged out of the land, it is scarcely needful to say, Mr. Dudley, of Berrie Down, could not "do things" in the same style as Mr. Black, of Stanley Crescent, who reckoned his returns loosely by thousands.

From cellar to garret, the house in Stanley Crescent proclaimed the existence either of unlimited means, or unlimited credit.

From the hall to the farthest bedchamber, Berrie Down Hollow told its tale of shortness of money and of utter honesty.

No bills were run in that pleasant Hertfordshire home ; no duns ever came clamouring for payment through the gates flanked by pyracantha.

Let post-time bring what ill news it might, such ill news never arrived in the shape of an intimation that any tradesman was weary of waiting for a settlement of his "little account;" that, if a remittance for the amount of his bill (inclosed) were not immediately forwarded, the writer would place the matter forthwith in the hands of his solicitor.

Honest and honourable, as Lord Kemms had said, were these poor incompetent Dudleys. Senselessly honest, Mr. Black decided.

To live beyond their means—to owe money, the payment of which was in the least uncertain or problematical, would have seemed to them the depth of humiliation.

A horror of debt, a dread of incurring expenses which their income did not fully warrant, a proud spirit of independence, a resolute determination to spend no more than they could well afford to pay—these were the traits in his country relations which filled Mr. Black with a vague amazement, with an almost contemptuous pity.

That any man—and, more especially, any woman—should hesitate about refurnishing a house, when upholsterers existed ready to send in goods on

credit, was a want of courage which, though perhaps not unnatural, was simply unintelligible to Mr. Black. That a family should refrain from luxuries, remain quietly at home, dress plainly, and strive, by a prudent economy, to make both ends meet, seemed to him the very acme of folly.

To “cut a dash” on nothing—to take a house with no certain prospect of ever paying rent for it—to furnish that house throughout on credit—to run bills for every article under heaven for which bills could by possibility be run—to trust to luck for meeting the Christmas accounts—to look on every tradesman as a mere speculator, who took his risk of ever receiving sixpence, to whom customers were as uncertain forms of profit as Lim. Lia. Co.s to Mr. Black, or else as “knowing cards,” who made the substantial householders carry them safe through the midnight flittings of a dozen less honest neighbours—these were a few of the articles to be found in the only confession of faith to which Mr. Black heartily subscribed.

From his youth upward, no delicate scruples concerning wronging his fellows had troubled the conscience of Mr. Black; and it seemed quite as strange

to him to witness the remarkable honesty which obtained at Berrie Down, as it would to a pick-pocket to behold a purse found in the street restored forthwith to its rightful owner.

No doubt the theory of honesty was an excellent, a beautiful science; but to carry that theory into every-day practice, appeared to Mr. Black absurd. According to his gospel, it was foolish to do without anything which could be procured for the ordering.

"Any fool," he opined, "could buy with money; but it required some cleverness to buy without money. If I had been one of that sort, afraid of this, and that, and 'tother, I should have stayed on servant to somebody all my life. Success is just like a woman—faint heart won't win her; and see what I have done—just look at me."

This was the fashion in which he addressed Alick Dudley, or any other individual on whom he hoped the sight of his exalted position might produce a beneficial effect. From the way in which he talked of his successes, it was only fair to presume his achievements had astonished no one more than himself. Perpetually he seemed trying to lay his hand

on his good fortune, in order to realise it ; failing in this attempt, he desired to see his neighbour's hand touch the glittering heap, so as to make sure it was no deception—no sham.

All his life he had been used to making believe. In the days when he lodged at Hoxton, he was wont to entertain his landlady with accounts of the great people he knew, who were going to do something for him ; and shabby, out at elbows, patchy about the feet, and much dinged as regarded his head-gear, he still, meeting former acquaintances in the street, would ignore Hoxton, and ask them, the first time they were out Clapham way, to give him a call.

He had been a liar from the beginning, and even in prosperity lying forsook him not ; but like as the wicked, of whom King David makes mention, were clothed with cursing, so falsehood was to Mr. Black as the garment which covered him, and as the girdle wherewith he was girded continually.

His life had been a shifting scene of unfair dealing ; of false pretences ; of uncertain climbing ; of incessant struggle either to retain, or to regain, a desirable position ; and because his memory

retained nothing but a confused recollection of excusing, inventing, distorting, misrepresenting, scheming, cheating, planning, the atmosphere at Berrie Down almost took away his breath by its rarity.

To the advantage, however, of being associated with a man like Arthur Dudley—against whose honour and integrity even slander could not make an accusation—who really had broad acres and fair lands—something tangible in the way of property—Mr. Black was by no means blind.

Society, he knew, had a foolish confidence in such individuals; and now, when, perhaps, for the first time in his life he was striving to make his fortune honestly and legitimately, he could not help feeling that the accession of such an ally gave him greater confidence even in himself.

Walking over the soft green turf at Berrie Down, he began to imagine he had done with tacking and veering, and hoisting false colours for ever; at last, it was going to pay him to be straightforward. If there were some things concerning the Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited, which he deemed it wiser to keep in the background, still

there was no necessity for beating about the bush. There was the Company—a good scheme, a tangible scheme, with no humbug about it; but rather, on the contrary, containing in itself almost every element necessary to insure success.

Very different was this venture to any with which he had ever previously been associated. Hitherto, he had looked for nothing beyond what he could make by merely promoting a company. He had assisted to usher dozens of ill-conditioned, unhealthy, rickety commercial infants into the world, and when he had pocketed his midwife's fee for his services there was an end of the matter. As a rule, these infants had either scarcely survived their birth, or else had grown up into disreputable swindles; and Mr. Black, having sense enough to know this kind of practice could scarcely continue to pay him for ever, most earnestly desired to get hold of something which really had, in its own nature, some fair chance of existence; and working it up thoroughly, make that a stepping-stone to future successes, up which he could safely climb to the very summit of the hill of Fortune.

He was weary, not of the dishonesty of his pre-

vious career, but of its anxieties, its uncertainties, its never-ending, always beginning work. Though a strong and hearty man to look at, he felt the years spent in planning and scheming—in “raising the wind,” in getting “paper melted,” in running about praying for bills to be renewed, in staving off bankruptcy, in softening the hearts of obdurate creditors—had told, and were telling, on his constitution. He knew, if no one else did, how often he had climbed and fallen; how often he had touched Fortune, and been spurned by her; how continually luck had travelled with him to a certain point, and then, suddenly taken herself off in a huff, leaving her former favourite to retrace his steps, or fight his way onward, as best he could. How he had lain through the long nights planning; how he had thought in the darkness of ways and means; how he had racked his brains, marvelling whence help was to be obtained; how he had walked the City streets in rain, in snow, in frost, in the broiling summer weather, in the winter, when the cruel east winds were careering up Cheapside; how he had got soaked to the skin, and how his clothes had dried again on him; how he had turned into taverns,

and drank brandy till he felt strong enough to go out again and face the worst,—all these miseries were fresh in Mr. Black's mind; to all of them, he hoped, with all his heart and soul, he had said farewell for ever!

The pace at which he had been travelling, he felt, must tell at last; over the stones, over the stones! backward and forward, in all weathers, with all sorts of anxieties dogging his steps; up and down hundreds of thousands of stairs; across the thresholds of scores and scores of offices;—how all this had wearied his mind and worn his body, he fully understood only when he stood under the trees at Berrie Down, resting idly at last.

There was no sham about Mr. Black's affection for London; but there was equally no question that he felt a short stay in the country might do his health much good; might clear his head, as he expressed it, and enable him on his return to town to resume work with greater energy than ever.

"Talk about a change to Hastings or Brighton," he said to Arthur Dudley, "why, it's nothing to this. To walk along the shore in either place, is simply walking down Regent Street, nothing else! Upon

my soul, I would quite as soon take a day's holiday in one as the other; and as for quiet, could the traffic in the City make more noise any time than that precious old sea? No; give me this solitude, this stillness, this perfect freedom, and I am content to leave watering-places to fast young women and idle men."

And no doubt Mr. Black was sincere in this statement. Though the appointments at Berrie Down were not on that scale of magnificence which Mr. Black would have liked to see his kinsman affect, still the very absence of this magnificence tended to make the house a comfortable one at which to visit.

The furniture might be old-fashioned and the draperies faded; yet to Mr. Black there was a certain novelty in sitting down on a chair which was undoubtedly paid for, that counterbalanced, to some extent, the effect of well-worn carpets, ancient sofas, spider-legged tables, and a square six-octave piano.

Besides, the mere fact of seeing people able to do without luxuries, able to resist the lust of the eye and the pride of life, produced a salutary

though vague impression on the mind of a man who had been brought up amongst a class which believes almost exclusively in externals, and pins its faith to goods and chattels, to fine feathers, to unlimited gilding, to many servants, and big houses filled with much French polish and varnish in profusion, with silk curtains and soft carpets, and pictures in heavy, costly frames.

If Arthur Dudley could afford to live in such poor style without losing caste, then what might Arthur Dudley not achieve if he were able to live in better style? A desirable connection certainly Mr. Black held that man to be, who, without any adventitious aid whatsoever, could remain a gentleman amid surroundings that "would settle me," mentally finished the promoter.

That there was something in birth, beyond a father leaving personal and freehold property to his son—that there was something also in rank over and above houses and lands—money and more money—Mr. Black began to believe; and in the pleasant summer time, amongst the green Hertfordshire fields, under the drooping trees, the promoter came gradually to understand something else, namely, that

a woman who, like Heather, could manage to make herself and others happy, on an utterly inadequate income, might, mated to a different husband, have proved a treasure beyond all price.

Even Mrs. Ormson, he knew, could never have shed so sweet a content over any home as Heather Dudley. "I believe," thought Mr. Black, "she would even have made that dog-kennel in Hoxton something worth looking forward to coming home to at night. She is not clever—that is, she could never fight her way in the world, nor go out into it like many women—but she is worth a barge-load of any I ever knew, for all that. By Jove! married to a clever man, would not she have made a home for him?" And then Mr. Black went on to consider, in a mournful kind of way, that let him climb to what worldly height he would, domestic comfort was a thing the future could not hold for him; that, though he might have servants and carriages, a house as fine as Lord Kemms, money at his banker's, and an income large enough to satisfy even his most extravagant desires, he could never expect to pass through any door which might afford him admission to such a paradise as that, in and out of which

Arthur Dudley passed at his own sweet pleasure, all unconscious of the blessings he enjoyed.

Never before had Mr. Black remained long enough at Berrie Down to appreciate the quiet beauty of that calm home life. A hurried visit from Saturday till Monday, a scramble for trains, a hot walk to church, pressing anxieties which made the still monotony of the country almost maddening to a man whose brain was in a constant whirl of excitement; a day or two, perhaps occasionally, through the week—when picnics were planned and excursions undertaken—had formerly been Mr. Black's experience of Berrie Down.

Most people know how wearisome and unendurable the stillness of night is when sleep refuses to close the tired eyelids, when either from pain of body, or distress of mind, the hours are passed in restlessness instead of rest. The silence of the country, its inaction, its dead-aliveness had been hitherto to Mr. Black precisely what sleepless nights prove to many a sufferer. He could not take repose out of it; and as day, with its work and its turmoil, seems preferable to the long, drawn-out darkness, through every hour of which ascends the moaning

prayer, "Would to God it were morning!" so even the noise and tumult of town appeared to Mr. Black sounds to be desired in preference to the awful and fearful quiet of that still life at Berrie Down.

But now the Hollow was to him as a calm summer's night, when refreshing sleep steals down upon the worn and the weary, giving them rest after toil, strength to rise and meet the trouble of the coming day.

The silence did not irritate him now, the utter repose of the life did not chafe his temper. He wanted to think, and he found time to do it. There was nothing pressing which required his return to town. He could let the express from Palinsbridge speed away to London, and leave him still behind at Berrie Down; he could lounge about the fields and build castles in the air at his leisure; he could stand and listen to the rustling of the wind among the trees without a thought of how time was going; he could lie on the grass, and plan his plans, and scheme his schemes, without ever a passing footfall to disturb him.

Further, he liked the liberty of the house. He could go and come, he could be alone or with the family, just as pleased him best.

There was no fuss about dress, no strict adherence to hours. If he went out for a quiet walk, dinner did not wait for him, and still he was not expected to starve the whole day, in consequence.

Mrs. Dudley had no black looks for guests who lounged in late to breakfast. There was always sunshine at Berrie Down; there was always some one to give that soft answer that turneth away wrath; there was no squabbling, no jealousy, no selfishness. In that house, it was not who should retain, but who should give up. Boys and girls alike, it was the same, who could do most for each other; and, beyond all, who could do most for Heather.

Naturally a shrewd man, Mr. Black could not choose but notice all these peculiarities of the household at Berrie Down; and as he began to take a personal interest in the members composing that household, so, in the ordinary course of things, he necessarily looked deeper than he had ever done before, only to see more and more in Heather to admire.

She was his antagonist, he felt, and yet he would have given much to have had her on his side. She would be averse to leaving Berrie Down, and yet it

was she, more than any other member of the family, he desired to have in town.

“By Jove! she is a woman,” he remarked in confidence to Mrs. Ormson; but finding his enthusiasm failed to kindle a corresponding flame in that lady’s bosom, he pursued the subject no further.

Even the very animals about Berrie Down seemed to Mr. Black different to the animals he had seen elsewhere: chickens that flew on Agnes’ shoulder the moment she appeared in the poultry-yard; dogs that relieved each other at the gate, and sat looking up and down Berrie Down Lane the whole day long, like sentries on duty; a terrier that let Lally’s pet kitten make a pillow of him; a cat which was turned into the pigeon-house every night to prevent the rats doing mischief, and allowed the pigeons to roost on her back without entering the slightest protest against such a proceeding; horses that ate apples and plums in any quantity—that would search Alick’s pockets for bread, and pick the flowers out of Agnes’ belt daintily and lightly; a goat which ruled supreme in yard and paddock, which reduced even a huge Newfoundland to a state of abject terror, which played such antics as Mr. Black had never

previously imagined could be gone through by an animal—which would get into the dog-kennel and keep its rightful occupant at bay—which would stand guard over the kennel and prevent Nero coming out—which would then be off chasing the smaller dogs about—butting at the colts, and causing them to rear and paw, and then scamper off round the fields, followed full flight by Jinny, who was fleet of foot than any of them. She was a disreputable goat, of low tastes; who drank ale and ate tobacco; who preferred sour apples to wholesome grass; who had an objection to letting herself be milked, and who, when she became the mother of a kid, seemed to think the creature had been sent into the world to be rolled over and butted, and hunted and teased, from morning till night.

A shocking thief was Jinny also, who would make her way into the larder and eat up bread and pies with an appreciative appetite which ought to have proved eminently gratifying to Mrs. Piggott; who might be found standing on her hind legs, sharing the horses' corn; who was discovered one day, on the top of a little rustic summer-house, munching with infinite relish the earliest pears that grew on

the sunniest wall of the garden. Every day Arthur vowed vengeance against that goat; and yet every succeeding morrow discovered Jinny at fresh tricks, engaged in carrying out some new mischief.

Then the pigeons! the ridiculous fantails and the consequential pouters,—the pouters so irresistibly like a parish clerk, the fantails so vain that, in walking backwards to exhibit their outspread feathers, they often fell head over heels, to the intense delight of Lally. Lovely pigeons! that would flutter down at sound of Heather's voice, and settle on head and hand, soft balls of white, smooth feathers, waiting to be fed.

It might, according to Mr. Black's idea, be a useless life; but, for all that, it was very tranquil and very sweet, and pleasant also from sunrise to sunset—a succession of summer days without a cloud.

Further, if, in the midst of so many romantic and countrified sights and sounds, it be not prosaic to make mention of such common matters as eating and drinking, I may add that the edible arrangements at Berrie Down met with Mr. Black's unqualified approval.

To a man who had been content for years and

years with chops and steaks, a pennyworth, daily, of potatoes, and a like value of bread, partaken of after the manner of those modern Israelites, City people in haste, and washed down by a pint or half a pint of bitter, it may readily be believed that the orthodox dinners which he deemed it the correct thing to partake of in Stanley Crescent were rather unappreciated luxuries.

What did he care for white soups and lobster patties—for entrées and Italian creams? The human being who had ever thought himself lucky to sit down to a pound of thinly-sliced beef or ham which he brought in with him wrapped up in a piece of newspaper; who had purchased American cheese, and supped on that delicacy in his Hoxton retirement; who had eaten shrimps at Gravesend, and partaken of Delafield and Co.'s entire as supplied after due adulteration by the landlord of the "Jolly Sandboys," was not likely to contract a passion in his later years for Anglo-Gallic cookery, for *réchauffés* and made dishes, for disguised vegetables and non-comprehensible meats; for sour wines and fashionable sweets. On such subjects he and Miss Hope stood at opposite poles; and it was the

funniest thing imaginable to hear the two wrangling over the different opinions which they held. To have heard them talk, any outsider might have supposed a new religion had been introduced, and that while the one held there was no safety out of the old faith, the other believed that to like a good-sized joint was a remnant of barbarism, a superstition only prevalent amongst the very lowest classes in the community.

For Miss Hope likewise, Berrie Down was liberty hall ; and therefore, while Mr. Black breakfasted off ham and fowl, eggs, and sirloins of beef, thick slices of bread and butter, and tea in quantity, the spinster, seated opposite to him, regaled herself with claret, fruits, and what Mr. Black vaguely called "green meat"—which meant lettuces, mustard and cress, and other delicacies of the same primitive nature.

Often Mr. Black openly declared his wonder that "all the trash she eat did not kill her ;" while Miss Hope was eloquent on the subject of English gluttony, and declared with more candour and politeness that she had never eaten a dinner in England fit for a civilized human being to partake of.

"Not," she added, turning apologetically to Mrs.

Dudley, "but that I consider Mrs. Piggott for England an admirable cook, and if she would only allow me to give her a few hints, I think you would find a change for the better, both in your expenditure and in your table."

Ever ready to meet the views of her husband's relations, Heather requested Miss Hope to extend to Mrs. Piggott the benefit of her experience; only to find, however, that such benefit had been previously offered and unceremoniously declined in words following—

"If I cooked well enough for your sister, Mr. Arthur's mamma — Miss Hope, mum—and if I please Mrs. Dudley, mum, I don't want no instructions from you, mum. No offence, I hope; if offence, I humbly beg pardon. I'm too old to learn new tricks."

To the truth of which last clause Miss Hope assented with such unnecessary readiness, that Mrs. Piggott's temper was excited instead of mollified; and when the lady in the kindest manner possible subsequently suggested "going into the kitchen to prepare a few dishes," Mrs. Piggott locked herself up in the store-room with a huge Bible and her

spectacles, and sat there till Bessie came to say the performances were over, and the messes ready for sending to table.

“And messes they be, miss,” declared Mrs. Piggott, after due inspection. “If Mr. Arthur or Mrs. Dudley either likes that trash, I shall be greatly astonished; but lor, miss! them old maids is all alike. If it’s not cats, it’s dogs; and if it’s not dogs, it’s meddling in other folkses business, and going about from house to house carrying their nasty prying ways about with them among their luggage. Who ever heard of boiling lettuce-leaves afore, or of putting onions, and sugar, and eggs among green pease, spiling the flavour of them? It’s not Christian, that’s what I say; and you tell me she fried them potatoes in oil; and that soup—why, it is thick with grease—butter, is it, miss? I wonder how much she has used! And a quart of cream, do you tell me? Well, if that is ’conomical cooking, I don’t know what ’conomy is. I hope master will like his dinner, that is all—I only hope he may.”

Which was about as great a fib as Mrs. Piggott ever uttered; for most devoutly did she hope the

good things Miss Hope had prepared might come out untasted.

“Poking about, indeed!—messing in the kitchen. I wonder how she would like me to go into the drawing-room this evening, and offer to play the pianer to her? Talk about servants knowing their places! It would be well if ladies learnt theirs, I’m thinking. Her sister would never have dreamt of doing such a thing; and as for Mr. Arthur’s wife, she is too soft and easy; she ought to know better than allow such goings on.”

Thus Mrs. Piggott—who, after refusing to take service with the second Mrs. Dudley, or in the republic which succeeded that lady’s marriage to Dr. Marsden—had come over to Berrie Down some twelve months after Heather’s arrival there, and stated that, “having heard a good report of Mr. Arthur’s wife, she had no objection to serve her, if she were in want of a cook.”

With which offer Heather closing, Mrs. Piggott a week later entered the gates of Berrie Down, and virtually resumed possession of all her old authority. Amongst her goods and chattels were a Bible, a cookery book, a tea-caddy (with a key), a pair of

spectacles, a work-box, and her marriage lines—all articles without which Mrs. Piggott never travelled.

A staunch Protestant, Mrs. Piggott read her Bible diligently on Sundays, and on what she called particular occasions—such, for instance, as the death of a relative, the news of some frightful railway accident, shipwreck, or colliery explosion, the sickness of any member of the Berrie Down household, the birth of a child, or in times of special aggravation.

But if she perused the sacred volume occasionally, she pored over her cookery book daily. From the valuable receipts it contained she had culled fragrant flowers in the shape of savoury dishes, curious puddings, wonderful sweetmeats, and a method of making puff-paste, in which even the housekeeper at Moorlands had not disdained to request instruction.

And after that, for Miss Hope to come with “her foreign notions, her garlic, her shalots, her tarragon, her basil, her clear soups (like dish-water), her meat done to rags, her vegetables cooked till all flavour was boiled out of them; her fruit breakfasts, her messy salads, her pinches of flavouring, her new-fangled sauces, her endless dishes, with not a good mouthful on each.”

If Mrs. Piggott had not, at this trying period, found a sympathizing listener in Bessie Ormson, for want of vent her indignation must have killed her ; as it was, Bessie took the keen edge off the knife that stabbed the cook, made fun of Miss Hope and Miss Hope's stew-pans, and told poor Mrs. Piggott that the result of the French dinner had been a failure. "We all unaccountably lost our appetites," said the young lady, slyly ; "the dishes were capital," no doubt, but then, if one be not hungry, you know," and then Miss Ormson looked archly at Mrs. Piggott, and the pair laughed wickedly.

"I hope you have plenty of cold meat in the larder," Bessie went on, "for we shall all be starving by supper time ;" and these words proving prophetic, Mrs. Piggott's anger was appeased ; and next day she unbent so far as to inform Miss Hope she would not mind watching how she made "that there sauce," for she thought it very good indeed.

The conqueror can always afford to be a little generous, and in this instance Bessie held that Mrs. Piggott acquitted herself with considerable credit.

"Far be it from me to say the things were in their own nature detestable," remarked Miss Ormson to

her uncle ; “under the circumstances, I do not think we can tell anything about them. We don’t jump to the conclusion that an air is unmusical because an utterly incompetent person attempts to play it, and clearly, Miss Hope knows as much concerning cookery as I do.”

“There may be something in that,” agreed Mr. Black ; “talking about music, why don’t you play and sing, like your cousins?”

“My brain never would bear the harass and excitement of the sharps and flats,” answered Bessie, plaintively ; and with that reply the promoter, who had lately taken it into his head every member of the family ought to do something well, and contribute to the success of the general social “rising” about to take place, was fain to rest satisfied.

END OF VOL. I.

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